

The Nine Points

The Nine Points

By
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London
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Norris Street, Haymarket
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1957


Dedicated

TO MY FRIEND

MRS. L. E. DAGGETT-ROSE,

TO WHOSE INFLUENCE AND HELP

IN TIMES OF STORM AND STRESS

I OWE

MOST OF THE GOOD THINGS OF MY LIFE

PROLOGUE

TWENTY YEARS BEFORE—IN INDIA

THE little paddle-steamer was making its way laboriously towards the pontoon. It strained and puffed, and finally, after tremendous exertion and several severe bumps, got alongside of the jetty.

The native passengers flocked out like ants swarming out of an ant-hill, while the four first-class passengers on the upper deck stood and watched them, in indolent disgust. These natives were mostly coolies and poor cultivators, and having been penned below in a small partition near the engine they were hot and very greasy. The odours that were lifted on the scorching May wind were familiar, but scarcely sweet.

An excited-looking Eurasian woman, clad in the exaggerated bustle of the period, with a large *sola-topee* perched on the top of her profusely oiled black locks, came panting and puffing down the steps towards the jetty. One of the first-class passengers sighed and got up to meet her. The other two young planters laughed, and went off. The husband of the Eurasian woman accompanied his wife, leaving the fourth passenger alone. He got up, stretched, yawned and shook himself together, scanning the road eagerly for a face he was evidently

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desirous of seeing. The jetty was crowded with its usual complement of coolies and beggars, in addition to which a native youth, clad only in the classical loincloth, was shouting "*Pān Tāmāco*," and higher up the slope of the river bank a native sweetmeat vendor was keeping the wasps off his dirty, melting sweets with a still dirtier looking palm-leaf fan.

The scene was not an inviting one, yet to Fred Carvill's eyes it was a comparative paradise. After the horrors he had experienced in Assam, Calcutta was delightful.

He took his *sola-topee* (pith hat) from the table, his solitary bag from the deck of the steamer, went down, and out on the pontoon. The coolies left him severely alone. He was decidedly shabby, and even a native knows when a *sahib* is down on his luck. His pith hat was bare of any cloth or *pugaree*; his boots were seeing their last days, and he had a general air of dilapidated gentility. The most casual observer could tell that this man's fortunes had reached their lowest ebb.

He walked up the wooden planks and looked down the sun-blistered road. The May sun was merciless, and the strong south wind only blew clouds of sand and dust into his face. At last, advancing towards him from the end of the road, he saw his friend.

Alec Farraday had not changed much during the past eight months. He was still very thin, with bent, stooping shoulders, a very vivid patch of crimson on each cheek showed up startlingly in contrast with the general pallor of his face. He was evidently pleased, though in a more or less bored, listless fashion, to see Fred Carvill.

"Hallo, old chap, glad to see you," he said, shaking hands. "I was half afraid you wouldn't turn up."

"Precious little chance of that," replied Fred. "Your

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letter was the greatest relief in the world to me. That beast of a manager had kicked me out, and I was chumming with the next garden Doctor Babu, and trying to live on four pice worth of *dhal* and rice a day. I was fast getting down to that point when anything seems possible ; —I can't tell you, Alec, what terrible thoughts have come to me night after night—even murder seemed a necessary evil, and, in those wild parts by no means an uncommon one. I was a desperate man when your letter recalled me to sanity and hope. What is this scheme you have on foot ? ”

“Come along with me now, and I will tell you everything later. It will take a long time to explain my idea properly.” He put his arm through that of the younger man and led him swiftly along. “I don't suppose I ever told you that I am married,” continued Farraday, “I daresay it will be a bit of a surprise to you. I am taking you to the place I call my home and you will meet my wife—she is a native.”

Fred Carvill made no reply. There seemed nothing to say. That any man in his senses, and above all his fastidious friend Farraday, could marry an Indian woman was a thing he could hardly understand, although in those days it was a more general thing than it is at present. Even then, it was only among those Englishmen who had renounced for ever the hope of ultimately settling down again in their own country, that such marriages occurred. Only those men in whose hearts had died the last flicker of hope that old age would find them in a pleasant and retired spot in England, ever dreamed of saddling themselves with that saddest of all burdens, a native wife and a family of mixed nationality. “Great Scott,” thought Fred Carvill to himself, “poor old Farraday must have

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given up every chance of going home again—a black wife! Ugh! I'd far rather put a pistol to my brains."

In silence the two men walked on past Government House, towards the big mosque at the corner of Dhurru-m-tollah. Passing along Bentinck Street, Farraday turned up a small lane on the right, and thence dodged about from one evil-smelling pathway to another, until they reached a small wooden doorway built into the solid wall. An iron clasp, fastened on the outside by a rusty old pad-lock, secured the door to the wall.

Farraday took a key from his pocket, and, turning to Carvill, laughed as he said:—

"I look quite like a bluebeard, don't I? There are only two women in the house and they always beg me to lock them in. We live in such a frightfully cut-throat quarter."

Carvill followed Farraday into a small paved courtyard. In one corner, under a pekul tree, which was growing out of the wall, a goat was tied, with a small *gumla* of water near it. Farraday broke off some leaves from an overhanging bough and threw them to the goat as he passed. They climbed up some stone steps, green and slimy, dilapidated with age and damp; on one side the masonry had subsided and the bricks fallen through, leaving a wide, dangerous gap. Farraday treated the stone staircase with the absolute indifference of familiarity, but Carvill stepped gingerly and looked upon it with apprehension.

The house consisted of two rooms, built some seven feet above the ground and resting on stone arches. It was under the house that the goat and three pariah dogs found their nightly shelter.

From the stairway they stepped into one of the two

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rooms of the house. An old native woman was squatting on her haunches in one corner, while on the mat near her lay a small brown baby, absolutely devoid of clothes. She was crooning softly while she kept the flies off the child with a long-handled palm-leaf fan.

"Where is your mistress?" demanded Farraday, in Hindustanee.

The old woman raised her hand and pointed towards the inner room.

"Leila!" called Farraday, "come here."

The purdah opened and a little figure clad in a white *sāri* glided out. She looked frail and thin, and her large eyes had a scared, frightened expression in them. She raised her two small brown hands and made a trembling *salaam* to Carvill, who was at a dead loss to know how to greet his friend's wife.

"How do you do?" he said awkwardly in English.

Farraday laughed. "She understands English perfectly, but her conversation in that language is limited. Leila"—he stretched out his arm and drew the frightened little creature on his knee—"Leila, this is a friend of mine. Don't be so nervous, he won't bite you."

She clasped her hands and gazed up into Farraday's eyes.

"Why has he come here? Will he take my lord away from me?" she panted in Hindustanee.

"No, Leila—now don't be silly—I am not going away from you. This friend has called to see me on business."

She gave a little sobbing cry and slipped to the ground at his feet. She lay with her long black hair trailing over the matted floor, her lips on his dusty boots.

"Leila," remonstrated Farraday, bending over her.

"Pardon, forgive me, my lord," she sobbed, the tears

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raining down her face, "you were away so long I got afraid—I thought ——" sobs choked her.

"You thought I'd gone for good—eh? You silly foolish little child-wife of mine," and gathering her up in his arms he petted and soothed her till her sobs ceased and her tears were dry.

All this time Carvill was standing—there was only one chair in the room and Farraday was seated on it. As soon as Leila recovered her composure she drew her white *sāri* shyly over her face, ashamed to have shown so much feeling before a stranger.

"Run and get us something to eat, Leila love," said Farraday, coughing terribly.

The cough startled Carvill, it had got so much worse in the past eight months. Leila stood watching her husband, her eyes dilated, her hand on her heart.

"There, I'm better now," said Alec again, wiping the cold sweat off his forehead.

Leila brought a *mora* (footstool) from the inner room, and shyly pointed to it, for Carvill to sit down on.

He laughed. "And where will you sit, madame?" he asked.

She made a little gesture, pointing to Farraday's feet, and Carvill understood that she usually sat upon the floor. In no woman's eyes had he ever read such depths of love and tenderness as he saw glowing in the dark passionate orbs of this poor little native wife.

After a good meal, of which curry and rice was the staple dish, Leila brought them iced whisky pegs, and, making a deep salaam to her husband, lifted the baby from the floor and retired into the inner room. She had waited on them at table, the old woman handing her the dishes. Every movement was full of grace and dignity, her

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eyes studying Alec's face and anticipating his slightest wish.

"She has gone to eat her dinner ; she absolutely refuses to eat at the same time that I do. I am not a very demonstrative man, Carvill, but my wife's love makes me ashamed of my own coldness. I am not exaggerating when I say that I hold her frail little life in my hands. If I left her she would die of grief—even her child would not keep her alive. Such love as she lavishes on me I shall never meet in this world again, and so for this, and other reasons, I wrote to you and told you to come down to Calcutta, and that I had something very good in store for you. Now, Carvill, first let me explain everything to you. I have suddenly come in to an inheritance I never expected, a title, estate, and an income of twenty thousand pounds a year. I only received the letter with the news about a month ago. If you were in my place, Carvill, what would you do?"

"Go to England, of course, by the next steamer, and enter into possession of all your wealth and honour," said Carvill emphatically.

"Ah! and leave my wife behind?"

Carvill was silent.

"Your silence gives you away. Yes, *you* would go to England and leave your native wife in India, Carvill, and not many men would think the worse of you for it. Well, granted I leave Leila behind, and wipe her out of my life—what remains? I go to England leaving a living wife and child in India, and however I may ignore their existence the fact cannot be altered. I cannot marry legally again, and I can have no family life. Even should Leila die, which is quite likely, the boy remains ; he is my son and heir. What a fate would be mine ! Haunted by the

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spectre of a native wife and a half-caste son turning up at any time! I should be seeking happiness, and, most probably, life itself, for, as you well know, one of my lungs is affected and I can only hope to live in a very dry climate—so, there is the picture of a broken-down man, wandering alone all over Europe (which fate befell my poor father) trying to snatch at every passing pleasure, and to add a year or two to a life of misery.”

“Then why not take your wife to England with you?”

“My poor little Leila who sits on the floor and has never worn shoes in her life, whose English is *non-est*, and who eats her curry and rice with her little brown fingers—can you picture her as Lady Farraday in a large English manor house with its staff of high-class servants?”

“But she is young, education can do so much——”

“Yes, but we are not children, and by the time she would be ready to rule her house I might be dead, or she might have pined and fretted herself away. Besides, I doubt if any education would benefit my little Leila; it would rob her of her charm and give her very little in its place. That cannot be—so is there anything else you can suggest, Carvill?”

“Since you love your wife so dearly and will not leave her—and God knows I honour you for it, Alec, old man—” Carvill’s voice was slightly husky, “there seems no better plan than to live quietly out here in India, drawing your income from home, and leaving your estate in good and trustworthy hands.”

“Yes, I agree with you—partially, but what of afterwards? When the little brown baby will be a grown man—and there may be half a dozen more of them yet—and when they grow up and get a knowledge of my

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rank and wealth—what of half-caste Farradays ruling at the old hall?”

Carvill sat silent, smoking, and trying to follow out his friend's train of thought.

“He doesn't want to part from his native wife, but hates the idea of his Eurasian children inheriting his title and wealth—well, no man can eat his cake and keep it too” was Carvill's conclusion.

“When any one has knocked about India as you and I have done, old man, we know how utterly useless are the very best Eurasians, and, as for the worst—well, no depth of viciousness and immorality is too deep for them. They are cursed from their birth with the grossest vices of the East and of the West—inheriting from both parents every evil taint in the blood of unnumbered generations. *We* know what Eurasians are—what is your verdict on them, Carvill?”

“Shifty, backboneless, deceptive brutes. Born liars, whose word cannot be depended upon, and who have no sense of honour, no gratitude.” Between the puffs of his pipe, Carvill blurted out his summary of the Eurasian character as he had had experience of it in Bengal.

“Yes,” a spasm crossed Farraday's lips, “you are perfectly right. My poor children will grow up Eurasians. Nature is cruelty itself. My gentle worshipping little Leila will have children who will scorn her for her black blood while they can never emulate her virtues. The very best half-caste is a weakling, and the very worst—God help us, a devil incarnate; lacking, indeed, enough fire and spirit to carry him on to the greatest heights of villainy, but having sufficient to land him in an eternal entanglement of ignoble vices. No one can loathe or condemn the Eurasian character more than I do—and,

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much as I love my wife, I have fully decided that our children shall never bear my title or inherit my estate. The best plan I can think of is to send some one to England"—he gave Carvill a searching look—"to carry out my wishes—even to bear my name—while I live and die here unknown."

A long silence fell on the two men.

The curtains between the two rooms opened and Leila glided out and came and sat at Farraday's feet, drawing her thin white *sāri* across her face as a veil.

Farraday pushed it back off her head and laughed: "You'll be suffocated with that thing over your head, Leila; my friend has already seen your face, so don't worry about covering it up again."

All his remarks to her were addressed in Hindustanee and she answered him in the same language. The windows, like most other windows in Calcutta, were wooden doors, closing with venetian shutters and open to the ground. They sat in front of those facing to the south, so as to get the full benefit of the refreshing breeze which is the one luxury of Calcutta nights during the month of May.

Overhead the indigo blue sky was illuminated by a myriad of stars, by whose soft light even the squalid surroundings of Farraday's home looked romantic and dignified; the outlines softened and the shadows deepened. In the dim light Farraday's profile looked like a cameo, the fair honest face of Carvill wore a look of spirituality foreign to its ordinary character, and the figure of Leila, seated with arms clinging round Farraday's knee, looked as lovely as a vision in a dream. Farraday gently caressed the sleek black head.

"And is thy little one asleep?" he asked.

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"Yes, lord, he sleeps like a lily-bud on the water, and thy servant, the worthless *burri* (old woman), sits watching and guarding him."

"And what is the mother of this lily-bud doing?" asked Farraday, smiling and pinching her little ear.

"She sits at her lord's feet and adores him," answered Leila, with a passionate gleam in her black eyes.

Farraday's hand rested lovingly on her smooth, satin-like neck.

"Go and sleep beside thy babe, sweet one; I have much business to talk with my friend, and all good little wives should be in bed."

Her hand clutched convulsively at his; she got up on her knees, her eyes fixed imploringly on his face.

"Let me stay here beside thee, my lord, I will not speak, I will not breathe loudly, lest it disturb thee; send me not away from thee, my king."

"I am spoiling thee, Leila, by giving in to thy fears. Well, stay then, if thou desirest to, but remember this is a business talk, and thou art not to listen, or to speak one word. Now, Carvill," he said in English, "we reached a point where I plainly showed you that I did not wish any of my descendants to inherit the Farraday estates, and also that I myself had fully made up my mind to remain in India. A month or two ago a *Babu* told me of a lovely little bungalow for sale in Madhurpur—I suppose you know that it is a natural sanatorium, and very dry?—I might live another ten years there. So much for me. I have been carefully thinking of what is best for my name and lands. Carvill, my dear fellow, I am going to place a great trust in your hands—will you go to England instead of me, as my representative?"

The young man had expected he was leading up to this.

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"I am sensible of the honour you are doing me—thank you very much—but ——" Carvill's words came haltingly.

"You don't understand, Fred. I am giving you that which I would give the whole world—very nearly—to be able to keep for myself." He coughed heavily as he spoke, and Leila's anxious eyes fixed themselves on his face. Carvill saw she kept her lips firmly closed in the determination not to speak, however great the temptation might be. It was indeed implicit obedience to Farraday's slightest order.

"Fred, my boy, I want *you* to go to England as Alec—or rather, Sir Alec Farraday, and the owner of Farraday Hall."

"Good Lord!" said Carvill startled. "What a wild idea!"

"Why? I propose to drop out of everything, only asking you to send me some small sum—say five hundred pounds a year—for life. Any larger figure might attract notice. I will give up to you every document and proof in my possession. Your identity must be lost for ever."

"But I am not the least bit like you—no one in the world would ever mistake us one for another—the thing is impossible."

"I have thought it out carefully for nearly a month, and it is not impossible. There is not the slightest hitch. No one in England has seen me since I was a boy of ten, and during my rambles on the Continent with my father we were never long enough in the same place for any one to have a vivid recollection of me. No one will be likely to meet you who has known us both. Can you not follow my idea? I am giving you every possible information, placing in your hands every proof I possess, every means

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of establishing your claim, and you must do the rest. Be perfectly natural. You will not have to pretend to remember anything, a child of ten years can be excused for forgetting places and people. Those of my own relations who knew my features well and would be likely to recognise me are all dead. Are you not willing to take the risk? Think of what you will be gaining."

"Ah, yes, I know. The temptation is awful. But I don't see how it is to be done. I don't see it yet."

Farraday brought out from his coat pocket a packet of letters and documents wrapped in an oil-skin cloth.

"It is too late for you to examine these papers to-night, but you can go over them carefully to-morrow," he handed the packet to Carvill as he spoke.

"You know very little of my story, old man; I suppose I had better tell a few of the general facts—details can be filled in afterwards. My career could be expressed by one word—Failure. I am a complete and absolute failure," he sighed bitterly as he spoke, and even in the uncertain light Carvill could see that he was ghastly pale. "Also I have no one to blame but myself. I have not only failed through bad luck and misfortune, but I have invariably crowned the mischances of fate by indescribable folly—reckless and wanton stupidity. I have been my own worst enemy—well, I am paying the price for everything now. Perhaps—who knows?—by voluntarily relinquishing the dearest hope and ambition in my life the sacrifice may weigh in the balance, and cancel some of the heavy debts I owe—even wipe out some of the stains contracted by past Farradays ——" he stopped with a smothered fit of coughing.

This time Leila did not look up; with her head resting against her husband's knees she had fallen asleep.

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“When the idea of giving up my name and birthright first came to me I put aside the notion as too quixotic for this every-day world, and, above all, for my selfish character. But it was of no use, the thought returned persistently until I began to realise that, for me, the narrow way of renunciation was the path of peace. Don't imagine that it was an easy matter for me to decide to act in this manner, it has been a fierce struggle to make up my mind to relinquish the very thing I have most longed for all my life—Farraday Hall has always been the summit of my desires—a fair dream of happiness I never expected could be realised.” He sighed, and a short silence fell on the two men.

“Well, I'd better get along with my story, it is very late already. I will not tell you the follies and sins of my youth—no one but God need judge them. Perhaps this life of perpetual ill-health, together with this renunciation, may lead me towards my salvation. All you require to know are the broad facts of my life and also a bit of the Farraday history. My grandfather was old Sir Thomas—he left two sons, Thomas and Clement, my uncle and father respectively. My uncle Thomas was the elder and the favourite of his father, who always made a distinction between the boys, heaping love, admiration and unstinted wealth on the one, and coldness, contempt and comparative poverty on the other. This partiality was the origin of the hatred between my uncle Thomas and my father. Why is it that the hatred of brothers is so terrible? It originated with Cain and Abel and has continued ever since. At any rate my uncle Thomas and my father were always at daggers drawn, and there was a great bitterness between them. When my grandfather, old Sir Thomas, died, it was found that he had made

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absolutely no provision for my poor father. His vast wealth and all his estates went to my uncle Thomas. Perhaps the old man trusted to my uncle's generosity—if he did, it was a broken reed to lean on, my uncle Thomas did not know what generosity meant. My father tried to earn a living as best he could—it is never an easy job when brought up as a rich man's son. However, he did his utmost, and earned enough to keep himself going by drawing caricatures and cartoons. He made the unpardonable mistake of marrying a poor but beautiful girl—my mother—she was a music-hall artist. My uncle Thomas—curse him! the old hypocrite—made this an excuse to sever all connections with him. When I was quite a small boy my poor father got a chill which resulted in slow consumption, and from that time—as I said before, I was a boy of less than ten years old—we led a wandering life on the Continent, where my mother's singing and dancing were our only means of support. My father gradually became a chronic invalid—those were hard days for all of us, and even the remembrance of our sufferings and poverty is a curse in itself. My uncle Thomas, in the meantime, had married a wealthy woman—the daughter of an M.P. They had two sons, Reginald and Thomas. When I came out to India, at the age of twenty, my father and mother were both dead, and my two cousins as sturdy and healthy as even my uncle could wish. How was I to imagine that fate would ever take me back to Farraday Hall? I cut myself off entirely from my people, in fact, I might add that I have never had much to do with any of them, and only paid two flying visits to the old Hall during my childhood. My uncle Thomas and my cousins looked down on me, and despised me because my mother was a daughter of the

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people, and I was too proud to sue for favours that should have been mine by right. It was just about the time when I met you first—how many years ago is it now—six? Heavens, how times flies—well, then, it was six years ago that my younger cousin Thomas died of typhoid fever, I was a lad of twenty-one then. A year after my uncle Thomas died, and my cousin became Sir Reginald. He was the best of that brood, and it was his generosity that had paid my passage to India; he also sent me £100 out of his private pocket to start on. I was glad when I heard of his good luck and wrote and told him so. Shortly after I fell into the clutches of a *Marwari* money-lender, and piled folly on folly. I was living in Calcutta and went to stay, at his own invitation, in a disused portion of his house in Chitpore. This old *Marwari*—Nursingdass Bhudridass is his name—picked a quarrel with me and I avenged myself as I thought fit (I was a wild beast in those days, Carvill). It was a cruel, wicked revenge and the Marwari vowed he would have my blood. It is not a nice story and I won't tell it to you—but—briefly—I fled away from Calcutta. I went to a small Dutch settlement (at least it had at one time been Dutch) called Chinsurah, and lay low for some months, picking up any odd job to keep body and soul together."

Carvill gave a sympathetic nod, he had had experience of that kind of life himself.

"What with poor food, often no food at all, and damp huts, I got fever. An old native Christian woman took compassion on me and nursed me for nine long months. Leila was her child—she was baptised Angela. There were only two of them, their men-folk were all dead and they were in receipt of a small pension from the Roman Catholic Mission there. They sold their little ornaments

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and their cooking utensils—you know how these people cling to their brass-ware?—and stripped themselves of all their possessions for a poor devil of a *sahib* who was too ill to remonstrate.”

Carvill saw the glitter of unshed tears in his eyes.

“Leila loved me from the first, poor child. While I was lying ill and helpless she never rested day or night, her weary little hand fanning me till she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. Ah! little Leila!” his hand softly wandered over the glossy black head at his knee, “it is not in the heart of many women to give all and demand nothing in return! As I got better the thought of Bhudridass and his devilry nearly made me wish I had died in my fever. Then one day the knowledge came to me that Leila loved me—and her love is the anchor that I cling to, the only thing that keeps me back from hell. I was lying at the door of their hut on a piece of matting, the old lady had departed to church and Leila was watching me—she was such a lovely girl then, a mere child, not fourteen. I raised myself on my elbow and looked at her. ‘I must go away, Leila,’ I said; ‘you have done enough for me, I must not stay and eat up all your food any longer.’ Her face changed, and without a word she fell sobbing on the ground beside me. She had no sense of shame as she poured all the love in her heart at my feet. She was mine, I could walk over her, she said. I took her into my arms to comfort her, and the intensity of her passion awoke my own. She was a child of nature and told her love over and over again, pleading only for love, only for some small sign that I loved her. As I held her against my heart I vowed I would never hurt the only being who had loved me since my mother died. ‘I will marry you, Leila; you shall be my wife.’ She

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had never expected this, she had merely offered herself to me in the abandon of her passion, asking nothing more than to be a passing toy, the whim of a moment. The purity and unselfishness of her devotion won me. I loved her with the only pure and lasting love of my life from the moment I held her little body in my arms. I married her, and for some months that little hut in Chinsurah was an earthly paradise. We were married by a Roman Catholic priest—the Superior of the Mission House at Chinsurah, Father Van de Schultz. Leila's mother died a few months after our marriage and we returned to Calcutta. My cousin Reginald had found out my address, and his lawyer, Mr. Targett, wrote and told me I was to have an allowance of £100 a year—and we are living very comfortably on that. I managed to conciliate old Bhudridass, and I have paid up his account, with its accumulated interest. I christened my son Thomas, but Leila calls him Būl-būl. So much for my past life. About a month ago I received another letter from Targett, the Farraday solicitor, telling me that poor old Reginald was dead, that I was sole heir to Farraday Hall, and that my income in future would be about twenty thousand pounds a year. Can you realise it, Carvill? I couldn't for some days. Then, when I did, it came home to me that it was too late. I am intensely proud of our beautiful old home, and of my name and my race. I will never have it said of me that, through my doing, half-caste Farraday's were ruling the Hall. Think of any Eurasian with twenty thousand a year to spend! The best would turn out a dissipated weakling. So the old race must die. Perhaps, after all, it is best. We have the taint of many diseases in our family, and have become a weak, degenerate lot. It rests with you,

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Carvill, to found a new Farraday family, and, for God's sake, let it be a clean, wholesome stock."

"And what if you should change your mind, Alec? What if Mrs. ——— if your wife should die?"

"That would make no difference. It is not of Leila I am thinking, or because of her that I am giving up the inheritance, but on account of our children."

Carvill sat silent for a few minutes, then he said: "Is not the Farraday estate entailed?"

"Yes, the entail is on the eldest son, not on the heirs general; but, my dear Carvill, you will sail to England as Sir Alec Farraday, your eldest son, I hope, will succeed you, and I shall retire to Madhurpur under any name that comes handy. I hope you will marry wisely, and well—if possible into the aristocracy—and rear up healthy normal English children to carry on the old name honourably."

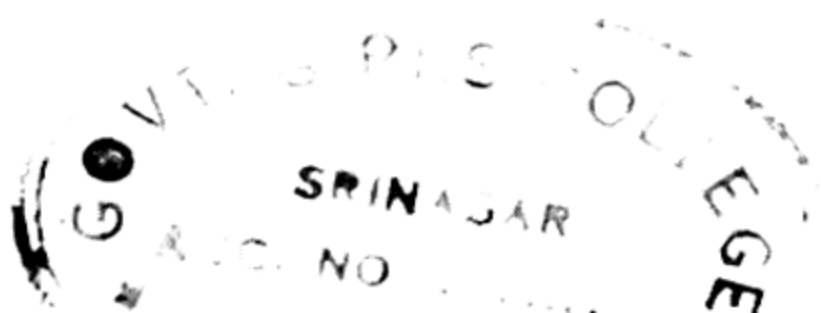
Farraday was interrupted by another fit of coughing that seemed to shake him to pieces.

"Come, my dear fellow, you surely are not hesitating? What is it you fear? What do you imagine can possibly happen? If it will make you happier and easier in your mind I will write out in minutest detail all the important incidents of my life, also the people I have met, and you can keep that record always before you, and refer to it when you are in doubt. Have you any scruples about accepting my name and birthright?"

Carvill hesitated. "Should I be defrauding any one? Doing anything dishonourable in the eyes of the law?"

Farraday gave a short laugh. "Just the same old Carvill, honest and conscientious to a degree! Slow to determine, but obstinate as a bull-dog. There is no other heir to Farraday Hall, and if you do not claim it, it will lapse to the Crown, and I shall lose my five hundred a year. You

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are defrauding nobody, Carvill ; I am, myself, the only loser, and it is a free gift to you on my part. I don't see that you need have any scruples about the matter. I will not claim the estate myself, for the reasons I have given you. I make you a present of it, my dear fellow, give me the happiness of knowing you are settled at Farraday Hall, and carrying on the best traditions of the family name."

Carvill covered his face with his hand. "You overwhelm me Alec ; you overwhelm me with your unstinted generosity and your trust in me. You pour all these gifts into my hands and ask me no questions—demand nothing for yourself —— "

"Five hundred pounds a year is not *nothing*," interpolated Farraday dryly.

Carvill took no notice of the interruption.

"You are giving me everything that you prize and value, as regards wealth and position, and you are bestowing it in such a manner that you make *me* appear to be conferring a favour by accepting your generosity. Farraday, what a great man you might have been !"

"There are many 'might have beens' in my life, Carvill ; but I do not complain, and I am certain that, in spite of some few natural regrets, I shall be a happy man while you are reigning as Sir Alec Farraday. Lord ! how I shall enjoy reading your accounts of your first impressions ! You must write regularly to me, you know, old chap. And you are wrong when you say I ask no questions concerning your past. I know most of what there is to know about you since you came out to India, but prior to that I am in total ignorance, and I want you to tell me all the details of your career. Not to-night, though, it is late already. Take that packet of papers and look through them ; think over all I have told you

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carefully, and when we have a chat to-morrow you can give me your decision, and also tell me your past history. I will take Leila off to bed and then make you a shake-down here. You will find it cool enough sleeping on the mat in front of the windows."

Farraday stooped as he spoke and gathered Leila up in his arms; she was such a light weight that he carried her as easily as if she were a child. She opened her eyes in sleepy wonder, and seeing her husband's face bending over her and feeling his arms around her, she clasped her hands round his neck, and whispered a few broken words of love as she nestled closer to his breast. He carried her into the next room and laid her gently on the wooden bed beside her baby; she did not wake again but fell off into a deep slumber.

Carvill lay on his improvised bed on the floor and tried to arrange his confused thoughts into some kind of order. He was keenly alive to the tremendous temptation that Farraday's offer was to him, and try as he would he could not bring himself to see that he would be committing a sin in taking up the Farraday title and estates.

"Of course it is a fraud, in a certain sense," so his thoughts ran, "but, under the circumstances, I cannot see that I am doing wrong in accepting another man's name and wealth. I will think things over again in the morning, but my mind is practically made up. I will become Sir Alec Farraday, and, since the name and estates are mine as a gift, my conscience is clear, and I will never allow my future life to be worried by useless regrets and scruples. Good God! what a chance in a million! I shall leave the old life of makeshifts and poverty for ever. How thankful I shall be to see the last of India—a cursed unlucky hole it has been to me, up to this—I shall start a

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new life with a clean sheet—yes, by jingo! and on stamped and crested paper! But, before God, I will run straight, and do my best in every way. I will consider myself a mere steward of all this wealth and honour. I will always be just and honourable, and Farraday shall live to see that his trust in me has not been misplaced.”

As he fell asleep with the Farraday papers under his head he knew that his decision was taken, for good for ill. He would fall in with Alec's plans and sail to England in his friend's name, to win or lose, as the case might be.

People rise early in India, there is no temptation to remain in bed, especially for eight months in the year. The sun was blazing hot by seven o'clock, and Carvill was glad enough of his cold tub and cup of hot tea. Leila had risen two hours earlier, and had seen the rooms swept and dusted by the old woman, while she milked the goat and lit the fire in an ordinary mud fire-place, called such by courtesy. No one but a native of India can ever kindle a fire in these mud bake-houses, and even if an outsider were to succeed in lighting it, no Western knowledge could ever keep it alight.

In the stone-paved courtyard under the pekul tree it was fairly cool, and there, seated on an upturned box, Carvill went over the packet Farraday had handed to him the evening before. The contents were divided into two large envelopes, one containing photographs and documents, the other letters. There were five photographs. One represented a beautiful country house, a truly magnificent specimen of Elizabethan architecture, surrounded by terraces which faded to distant parks and woods. Under the photo was written, Farraday Hall. Carvill caught his breath for a moment, it was a far more beautiful house

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than he had imagined. He studied it intently and a flush rose to his cheeks. His last scruple, his last doubt vanished as he replaced it in the envelope, but he wondered exceedingly at Farraday's strength of mind in relinquishing such a birthright. The other photographs were faded and did not interest him so much. One was of Clement Farraday and one of Lucette d'Orleans in a light dancing dress of twenty years previously, and on the back was written—To Clem, with love from Lucy—and Carvill knew it was the likeness of Lucy Evans, Farraday's mother. The remaining two were of old Sir Thomas Farraday and his wife Lady Helen, Alec's grandfather and grandmother.

There were only three documents, the marriage certificate of Clement Farraday and Lucy Evans, and the two death certificates of each of them. Clement had died in Marseilles and Lucy in Vienna.

Carvill did not read all the letters, there were over thirty of them, comprising some from old Sir Thomas to Clement, also a few from his uncle Thomas to Alec, others from the younger Thomas, and Sir Reginald, and lastly, those from the lawyer Targett.

Carvill thought he would not have much difficulty in claiming the estate with all these documents as proofs. Of course it remained to be seen how he would prosper, and whether any doubt would be cast on his title. He tied up the packet with a light heart, and spent a long morning playing with the brown baby, and carrying on a one-sided conversation with Leila. Farraday had gone out to buy their daily market, as in India everything is bought fresh every morning.

On his return they had a late breakfast about eleven o'clock. During the heat of the day, while Leila and

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Bul-bul were having their usual siesta, the two men lit their pipes and prepared for a long talk.

"I can see by your face that you have made up your mind, one way or another, Carvill; now, what is it to be?"

"First of all, let me tell you my history, for we must see if it will fit in with yours, and what precautions will be needed, in case I leave India as Sir Alec Farraday. My father was Captain Carvill, of the Royal Fusiliers, and he was killed during the Indian Mutiny. My mother was out here too with him. I was born a few months after the Mutiny and my poor mother died in giving me birth."

"Then you are just twenty-five," interrupted Farraday with evident satisfaction, "and as I am twenty-seven, there is not much difference in our ages. You are such a quiet, steady chap, that you will easily pass for two years older than you are."

"Yes, we are nearly the same age. Well, as I said, I was born in India, just as the Mutiny was over, and some friends sent me to an orphanage for officers' children. When I was about six years old I was sent to England. My great-aunt, Miss Annie Carvill, was my only relative. She put me to board with a clergyman's family, principally, I think, because she hated boys, and for the same reason, I suppose, that worthy clergyman did his best to make my life a burden to me. I never remember having sufficient to eat. My great-aunt could not bear the sight of me and no one ever said a kind word to me. I was the most neglected and uncared for little beggar in Christendom. My education was of the scantiest description possible, and my small pension always seemed to be swallowed up as soon as it was due——"

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"Just one moment," said Farraday. "What was this clergyman's name and where did he live?"

"He was the Rev. Matthew Mickleworth, and he had a small living in the north of Yorkshire—Staines was the name of the place—I have often compared Mickleworth in my mind with Squeers—he was just as great a hypocrite, and just as big a bully. I was brought up with three other boys. One poor little fellow died when he was thirteen. The second went into his father's business in London, the third was the son of Anglo-Indian parents, like myself, and came out here, I believe."

"What were their names?"

"The boy who went to London was called Jack Miller, and the one who came out here was Harry Nash."

"Well, there is just this one point that I would like to bring to your notice, that, if you wish to remain in undisturbed possession of the Farraday estates, you will have to try to avoid all your life meeting either Miller or Nash, but above all the Rev. Mickleworth."

"I don't know. I was a thin, weakly-looking boy in England; it is only lately I have broadened out. I don't fancy either Jack or Harry would recognise me easily. I was only about fifteen when I last saw them. I have heard that old Mickleworth is dead, but I can't say for certain if it is true. To go on with my story. I was eighteen when I came out to India, and I came straight from Yorkshire to Calcutta. They called me by courtesy an engineer, but, as I had passed no examinations, I found work very difficult to obtain. I must tell you that, in the meantime, my great-aunt, old Miss Annie Carvill, had died, and left the whole of her fortune to charity. It was a severe blow to me, as, being her sole relative and the only Carvill left alive, I had always counted on getting half her wealth, at

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least, if not the whole. I think I have given you most of the facts of my past life, but is there anything more you would like to know?"

"Well, it narrows down the question, decidedly, and it comes to this," said Farraday slowly, "that up to the time of your leaving England, that is, during the first eighteen years of your life, you were living in a small Yorkshire village—Staines—and your two school-boy friends, Miller and Nash, are the only ones likely to recognise you as Fred Carvill."

"Yes, poor men have few friends, and having no relations alive I seem more isolated than most young fellows. Since my pension stopped I've been living from hand to mouth as best I could. A job here and there, with long spells in between. I met you six years ago, when we were both working at that mill in Bally. I have thanked God over and over again for your friendship—it has been the only one in my life, so far. My last billet, I think you know, was in Assam, as an engineer on one of the tea gardens, but, as I told you, the manager dismissed me in a fit of passion, and gave me no salary. I was stranded with a vengeance. I managed to arouse the sympathies of the Doctor Babu of the next tea estate, and he put me up for about a month. Then I got your letter, and the money you sent to pay my fare to Calcutta. I don't find it easy to express myself, Farraday, but God bless you, old chap,—for thinking of me." The two men clasped hands in mutual understanding.

After a few minutes Farraday said: "Don't be vexed with me for inquiring, but have you had any entanglements, or love affairs in your life, up to now?"

"No, not one. I don't fall in love easily, and I have been too poor for any girl to think of me. I can honestly

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say that I have never yet looked at a girl with a thought of love or marriage in my mind."

He did not add, for fear of hurting Farraday's feelings, that the only women he had met in India had been natives and Eurasians, and he had an instinctive hatred and loathing that prevented him from ever being friendly with them, far more thinking of them with any degree of love.

"Now that you have given me an outline of your history, Carvill, and I know you have made up your mind one way or the other, what is your answer going to be? I think I know that too, but I leave you to say it."

"I will take all you offer me, Farraday, your name and your wealth, if you really wish it, and give it to me as a free gift. I will be a careful steward of the trust confided in me, and I will always act justly and honourably to the estate." Carvill spoke slowly and with emphasis, much in the manner of a man making a solemn covenant, and as such he certainly regarded his promise to act honourably by the estate. Farraday was glad to see the manner in which he accepted another man's name and wealth, but he had expected him to be scrupulous and just. When he chose Carvill, he gauged correctly the character of the man. "If at any minute," went on Carvill, "you should wish to have it back, I will hand it over to you without a murmur —"

"No such thing," put in Farraday sharply. "I will never demand Farraday Hall from you, but my descendants may hear, by some chance, that they have a right to the estate, and as I have already pointed out to you, this is what I am doing everything to avoid. Having once taken up the position, let no threats, no events of any sort, ever turn you out of it. Swear this solemnly to me."

Carvill gave him the required promise, adding: "Of

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course, unless circumstances are too strong for me, and I have to give in”.

“ Well, you can fight till the end, and die fighting, so to speak. Now we must carefully study our plan of action, I don't want there to be any hitch in the scheme. I will write to Targett by this mail—by the way, did I tell you he had already remitted me five hundred pounds and would send me as much more as I wanted? I will tell him that I hope to sail for England in about seven or eight weeks, and that I wish him to remit by wire, immediately, on receipt of my letter, another five hundred. In the meantime, I will make an exhaustive diary of my life, up to the time I came to India, and of most events that have happened since. You can keep the diary by you, and it can be your guide. Then, you must set to work to study my handwriting and to copy it; you see, they already have a specimen of that, and it will not do to change it. With what remains of the first five hundred you can book your passage and buy some decent clothes, and with the other, when it comes, I will buy the property in Madhurpur, and retire there as Alec Murray. I trust to you to send me five hundred pounds a year, also to look after Leila and the boy in case of my death, and you can explain the annuity as you think fit to Targett, or any one else who asks questions.”

Two months later Fred Carvill sailed for England in the SS. *Eldorado* as Sir Alec Farraday, and was treated with the greatest respect and courtesy on board.

The various social papers in England announced his arrival. A cutting from one ran:—

“ We have much pleasure in informing our readers that Sir Alec Farraday has returned to take possession of his ancestral home, Farraday Hall. His estates are situated

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in Sussex, about thirty miles from Brighton, and contain some excellent preserves for shooting. The baronetcy of Farraday is an old one, being established in 1662, in the person of Sir Warrander Farraday, and as a county family they can trace their descent to John Farraday in the reign of Henry II. The present baronet is the ninth in succession to hold the title. He is a young man of twenty-seven, and has spent the whole of his life abroad. During the last seven years he has been travelling in India, and will no doubt be able to place his experiences and views concerning our great empire in the East at the disposal of those interested in the Foreign Office. Sir Alec Farraday is the grandson of the well-known Sir Thomas Farraday, who we can remember as a distinguished scholar, a Conservative of the old school, and one who took a prominent and honourable place in the government of the country. The young baronet has our good wishes and congratulations on succeeding to the title and estate, and we hope he will have every success and happiness in his future career. We have no doubt he will prove a most welcome addition to our county society—following in the footsteps of his distinguished ancestors."

AFTER TWENTY YEARS

CHAPTER I

THE office rooms of Nathaniel Targett looked out on the quiet village street. The wire covered half-blinds kept out the glare and dust and toned down the bright sunshine that was pouring in through the windows. The rooms were cool, quiet and solemn, very refreshing and resting to any one coming in from the hot, dusty country roads, but dull and weary in the extreme to those penned up between their grey papered walls for six or seven hours a day. The clerks at work in one of these office rooms evidently found the soft light was not conducive to strenuous mental exertion, and were languidly trying to see how little work they could possibly accomplish during the lagging hours. The three young men sat at one desk, and at the other was a grey-headed elderly man, whose face bore the unmistakable impression of the legal type. He was engrossed and immersed in all the details of his occupation and did not observe the slack attitude of the young assistants. They would have fared badly if he had turned round suddenly and caught them idling, but his mind was so busily employed in tying and untying legal knots that he did not even glance up when a firm, brisk step sounded in the small passage dividing the office-rooms. Needless to say the young clerks did not betray the same concentration of thought; they stopped their

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desultory tasks with alacrity, and turned curious and somewhat surprised glances on a young man who entered hastily, and evidently without experiencing the slightest tremor of awe at the quiet and solemn respectability of his surroundings. The advent of a stranger was always a god-send to the young clerks, and this one was decidedly out of the usual run of visitors to the firm of Nathaniel Targett. He came in with a breezy assurance and self-possession, looking, as the three assistants told each other afterwards, "as if the whole blooming show belonged to him".

The cheerful young stranger left the door open (in itself a heinous offence against office rules) and went up to the old man at the desk, and gave him a sounding and very affectionate slap on his bent shoulders.

"Hallo, Mr. Grimson, hard at work as usual! Why, you haven't altered a bit during these six years! Upon my word, you look exactly the same as you did the very first day I can remember you."

Mr. Grimson turned his startled eyes on the young man, then, rising with alacrity, he shook both his hands heartily.

"My dear George, my dear George, how are you? I am delighted to welcome you home again. And how pleased Mr. Targett will be, to be sure!"

"I haven't seen him yet—where is he? I thought he might be in here, and that is why I have intruded. I suppose Uncle is busy flying round the country-side, drawing up wills for all the old fools in the district, or marriage settlements for all the young ones?" and the young man laughed heartily at his own joke.

"Mr. Targett expected to be back in time to receive you, my dear George, and I am sure he will be very

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grieved that he did not manage it. You must allow me to congratulate you on obtaining your degree; so you are a full-fledged doctor now?"

"Only a Berlin M.D., not a London one," replied George. "But I am going to make up for that by getting my F.R.C.S. in London. I've only come down for a short holiday."

"Mr. Targett told me how well you were doing, and once again I offer you my congratulations and best wishes." Grimson had a dry rasping voice, but a faint tone of evident affection was distinctly audible to the astonished ears of the three clerks, who had always regarded "Old Grim" as beyond the pale of human emotions. There was the old man, too, gazing almost sentimentally at the young stranger, whom the assistants decided in their jealous hearts was *not* handsome, only some misguided fools might consider him so.

"Thank you, Mr. Grimson, you were always one of my best friends, I know. How is Uncle? I hope the old boy is keeping fit."

"Your uncle keeps splendid health," answered Grimson, with a reproving glance in the direction of the three clerks, who were industriously listening with all their ears, "and if you will excuse me, George, I'll take you to Mr. Targett's private room, where you can wait for him."

He conducted the young man into the other room on the opposite side of the passage; it was the *fac-simile* in size and gloom of the one they had left, but comfortably and even handsomely furnished. A good carpet was on the floor, a solid, old-fashioned mahogany writing desk in the centre of the room, and chairs of the same weight and respectability arranged methodically around.

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Against the walls were heavy steel safes and long boxes, labelled and classified.

"Well, I declare, this room is exactly the same as when I saw it last! It hasn't been changed a bit. You are a conservative lot of people down here in Sussex, Grimson."

"Your uncle believes in keeping to the old order of things, and it seems to prosper with him. Now, I think if you will excuse me, George, I'll leave you here and return to my room. Those lazy young rascals don't do a stroke of work while I am not watching them." He formally shook hands again with George and returned to his desk.

The young man sat on the edge of the table, watching the bit of the village street which could be seen over the top of the blinds. He swung his leg impatiently to and fro and whistled snatches of songs as he sat waiting. It seemed an hour to George, but in reality it was only about twenty minutes, when the slow heavy tread of an elderly man sounded outside the door. At first he thought it was Grimson returning, but when he saw it was his uncle he jumped off the table, and seizing both the old man's hands wrung them with warmth.

"My dear boy, my dear boy," murmured Nathaniel, with tears in his eyes.

"How are you, Nunc? Fit as a fiddle—eh? Well, I am delighted to see you again after all these years. Where have you been all the afternoon? I have been here for the past hour. I was awfully disappointed you were out when I arrived."

"I, too, my dear boy, am sorry I could not be at home to welcome you. I had some urgent business at Fletching and drove over early—hoping to be back in time. Two of my best clients were concerned, and they kept me

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in attendance on them for two hours longer than they need have done. Forgive me, dear George, you know I would have gone to the station to meet you if I could have managed it. Come along now, and let me take you up to your room."

"I've been up, thanks, Nunc, and had a wash and brush down. Old Mother Packer was loud in her welcome, and with a little encouragement would have embraced me, I'm sure. I've unpacked already and taken possession of my old quarters."

"I was going to add that I shall have to leave you again for half an hour or so, as I have an appointment at four o'clock with Sir Alec Farraday. As the matter is not of a private nature you may as well remain, George. He won't be here very long and I am sure he will be very pleased to meet you again."

"I have pleasant recollections of Sir Alec and Lady Farraday. They were very nice to me, and I used to fish near the Hall—do you remember? There were a whole tribe of little kiddies. I was nine years older than the eldest girl, let me see—what was her name?"

"Margery," supplemented Nathaniel.

"Yes, that's it, Marnie we used to call her. She was a jolly little beggar, always in mischief, and the boy was a nice little chap too. I feel quite old when I think of those days."

"Sir Alec has never changed; he is a true friend and a good neighbour to me. I don't know what I should have done without him, and Lady Mary, and the dear children. They seemed to understand how lonely I was while you were away, and they did their best to cheer me up and keep me lively. They have made me feel almost like one of the family. Sir Alec is a fine man, George, I

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have the greatest respect and esteem for him. Here he is," as a couple of horses trotted up to the door.

"Talk of an angel," quoted George under his breath, as the door opened and Alec Farraday came into the room followed by a girl of about eighteen.

"How do you do, Sir Alec? And how are you, my dear Miss Margery?" said Nathaniel, rising to shake hands. "Allow me to introduce you to my nephew, George, who has just returned from his travels, and whom I hope you may remember from his boyhood days."

"Glad to meet you, my boy. Of course we remember you well, don't we, Margery? A fine young scamp of a boy you were, too; and what have you done all these years? Been abroad, eh? Had a good time and a nice holiday."

"He has not had much of a holiday," answered Nathaniel, giving his nephew a look expressing the pride he felt in him. "He has worked very hard during these six years and has done me great credit. I am really proud of my boy. Both in Heidelberg and New York he managed to pay his own expenses by taking up temporary medical work."

"Good! good! A very excellent spirit. You have gained your M.D. your uncle tells me, let me congratulate you," and Sir Alec shook hands again with the young man.

"Thank you, it's an M.D. of Berlin and I don't think much of it. I am glad enough of the additional experience I have gained in America. There is no doubt that New York is very advanced in all the newest and most scientific medical appliances and inventions. I have enjoyed my travels and I don't think I have wasted my time."

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"That's right, work while you are young and you can afford to sit still in your old age, that's what I am always telling Tom, the idle young scamp. Well now, Targett, I won't take up much of your time, as I know you must be longing to have this young man to yourself. Will you take my instructions for the lease of the Red-loam Farm and then we can leave you in peace."

While Sir Alec and Nathaniel were discussing the details of the lease George and Margery migrated towards the window. They had not met for ten years, and where he had a vivid recollection of a wild, muddy, unruly child, whose kisses and caresses were lavished on him, she had a tender sentimental recollection of a tall, grave boy whom she had worshipped in secret during all these years. He looked at her critically. He saw the rosy colour coming and going in her face, and wondered at her shy downcast eyes.

"She must have quite forgotten me and doesn't like to say so," thought George, and, to put her at her ease, he talked of trivial subjects, and was decidedly impressed by the effect of dark eyelashes on a 'carmine cheek, and the sudden upward glances of very beautiful blue eyes. He found her a change to the American girls he had been meeting lately, and remembering her demonstrative liveliness in former years was puzzled to find her so reserved and embarrassed. He was keenly interested in the study of the girl who stood with downcast eyes before him, whose fleeting glances gave him a glimpse of some secret he was not able to read, and whose farewell to him, ten years before, had been sobbed with abandon on the front of the first dress shirt he had ever worn. When Sir Alec rose to say good-bye, George was chatting and Margery listening. She summed up courage to look into George's

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face as they shook hands, and he knew then, with sudden intuition, that she had never forgotten him.

"May I call and pay my respects to Lady Mary?" asked the young man as he shook hands with Sir Alec.

"By all means, only we don't stand on ceremony with such old friends," replied the latter, in an open, hearty manner. "You must both come and dine with us some night this week, my wife will send you an invitation." He went off, and Miss Margery tripped after him.

George realised, as they left the office, that the girl had brought an atmosphere of light and sunshine with her, and that, now she had gone, the room became immediately as dark, solemn and uninteresting as it was before. He stood at the window and watched her mount her pretty bay horse and ride away. Her golden plait and pale blue tam o'shanter being the last he saw of her as she turned the corner of the village street.

He drew a long breath. "By Jove! What a pretty girl she has grown up, after all."

"She is a very pretty girl, and as good as gold, bless her heart," said Nathaniel warmly.

"She must be eighteen now," went on the young man in a musing tone, as if he were expressing his thoughts aloud.

"Let me see. It's twenty years since Sir Alec came back from India, and nineteen since his marriage with Lady Mary. Margery was the first child, so she is about eighteen,—turned eighteen, I should think."

"And yet she is still wearing her hair down her back in a plait," remarked George.

"We don't go in for being very fashionable and up-to-date down here in this quiet village," replied Nathaniel, with a twinkle in his eye. "You must remember that this is Dane

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Hill and not New York. Miss Margery does up her hair at home and for church, but she always has it in a plait when she is riding, and very sensibly too, when you come to think of it. She is, in many ways, still treated as a child, and seems to me to have retained a child-like simplicity of heart and mind. She is growing up a sweet girl, but I really believe that Sir Alec and Lady Mary cannot realise that she is nearly a woman, and I don't blame them, for it seems as if it were only yesterday that she and Tom used to scamper all over the country on their ponies, with a pack of dogs at their heels. She was a sad tom-boy in those days. She is a great favourite of mine, and a sweet little thing, but very wilful; Sir Alec spoils all his children." Nathaniel was speaking as he sorted several documents and papers, and locked up the safes and desk.

"Come along, now, George, my boy, and let me really have a good look at you, and see how you have altered and improved, and we can have a nice long chat together." Linking his arm affectionately in that of his nephew, he led him down the narrow passage, through a baize panel let into the wall, and swung in front of a heavy oaken door, which divided the office and business rooms from the rest of the house. They went out through a handsome hall into a large and beautifully kept garden, resplendent in all the glory of midsummer. Nathaniel showed George some of his favourite blossoms with the pride and joy of an amateur gardener; his flowers were his recreation and only hobby, and nobly they repaid him for all the care and attention he lavished on them. He had an old gardener, by the name of Joe Cutter, who was famous throughout the country side for his success in the rearing and culture of garden flowers, and Nathaniel

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prided himself far more on this eccentric and independent old soul—who flatly refused to live on the premises and to consider himself a servant—than he did on his faithful and necessary factotum, Grimson.

After tea, the two men sat in arm-chairs under the leafy shadow of the lime-trees, and Nathaniel tried to glean from George's chatter the workings and changes of his mind and brain during the six years they had been separated. He had known the boy so intimately in the past, and understood him so thoroughly, that he was still able to follow the various windings of his thoughts and ideas. Suddenly he found the avenue blocked, and searched vigilantly in his own mind for the cause. He was not long before he discovered that the reserve in his nephew's discourse touched only the people he had met first in Berlin, and with whom he had lived during all the years he was in New York.

“What is he like, this Ezra Reubens?” asked Nathaniel, not looking at George and puffing away contentedly at his excellent cigar.

“Oh, an American Jew, clever, exceedingly smart and up-to-date in everything, a born organiser of great concerns, and, added to all this, quite one of the leading lights in the way of scientific learning and advanced thought.”

“Quite a genius,” remarked Nathaniel dryly.

“He is indeed,” replied George warmly, “truly a genius. Whether he is floating a company, or setting up a piece of machinery, or debating at a scientific meeting, he always throws himself headlong into it, heart and soul; he brings all the weight of his powerful brain to bear on it, and everybody is guided by him and listens to him.”

“What special science is he interested in?”

“He has studied medicine for years, and took his degree

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in New York. He is an expert on the human brain and mental diseases, also very learned in toxicology and—and ——” George suddenly paused for a word.

“Yes,” said Nathaniel, in a mildly interrogative tone, his attention seemingly concentrated on his cigar.

“He is a powerful mesmerist and a firm believer in the occult sciences. He is the organiser and most powerful medium in the Strussler spiritual séances, of which you may have heard.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Nathaniel, in a non-committal manner. “And what of his wife, the Mrs. Reubens you wrote about, what does she say to this spiritualism?”

“Mrs. Reubens is not Ezra’s wife”; there was a strong note of reserve in George’s voice. “She is the wife of his younger brother Ephraim.”

“And what is Ephraim Reuben’s profession?” asked Nathaniel, taking no notice of George’s disinclination to discuss the family in question.

“He is a loafer; one of the weakest and most vicious type of man I have ever met.”

“And yet you lived in his house for four years,” remarked Nathaniel dryly.

George looked up quickly and caught the old man’s kind eyes bent on him; a dull red flush mounted to his forehead.

“I met Ezra in Berlin five years ago. He attracted me at once; in fact, I may as well say he is my best friend, and has honoured me by picking me out from among a host of satellites and admirers.”

“Poor boy,” said Nathaniel softly, under his breath.

George did not notice the interruption and continued eagerly: “He is powerful, wealthy and clever, and has a strong influence in New York. Had it not been for him I could never have obtained the post of junior assistant

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surgeon at the Brooklyn Hospital. He and I had been friends for over a year when he asked me to share his house in Fifth Avenue. I agreed, as you know, and stayed with him whenever my duties at the hospital allowed me to do so."

"And how did you meet Mrs. Ephraim Reubens?"

"She lives with her brother-in-law; he supports her and her husband." George's voice had again become studiously cold.

"Who else lived with Ezra Reubens?"

"Only ourselves, but he entertained on a large scale, and had most distinguished guests staying with him from time to time."

"I see. And this Mrs. Ephraim, is she also an American Jewess?"

"I really can't tell you," said George, rising impatiently and throwing away his cigar. "She has a little Spanish blood in her veins, I believe, but I never inquired her nationality. She is the most beautiful woman in the world." The last sentence was seemingly wrung out of him as he walked away.

"My poor boy," thought Nathaniel, as he sat still and looked after him. "A Spanish - American Jewess — the most beautiful woman in the world—and married to a loafer—my poor boy!"

The question of the Reubens was not discussed again between the uncle and nephew until after dinner, when Nathaniel inadvertently raised the subject.

"And what are your plans for the future, George? I suppose you are looking out for a practice?"

The red flush that Nathaniel regarded as a danger signal rose to George's brow.

"Mr. Ezra Reubens has asked me to act as his private

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secretary and medical assistant while he is in England, and has offered me munificent terms."

Nathaniel was startled ; the affair was becoming serious.

" I did not know they were in England, or had any intention of living here," he said hastily.

" They are not here at present ; they crossed from New York with me and have gone on to France and Germany for three or four months. Ezra has a house in London, and said he hoped to be back by October at the latest."

Nathaniel gave a sigh of relief, much could be accomplished in four months.

" And did you give your word that you would accept Ezra Reuben's offer ? "

" Of course not," answered George indignantly. " How could I be so ungrateful to you as to bind myself down for an indefinite period without consulting your wishes ? No, no, I only said I would speak to you, and let him know my decision later. But I must honestly confess that his offer attracts me, and, subject to your approval, I hope to accept it. It would mean so much to me," went on the young man enthusiastically, " just think of all I could do ; I would have time to carry on my medical studies, and could go in for my F.R.C.S. I should have every opportunity for experiments and lectures, the intercourse of the cleverest thinkers of the day, no anxiety as to ways and means, and I should cease to be an expense and continual drag on you, Nunc dear."

" Ah well," said Nathaniel easily, with a quiet smile, " you are home now for a four months' holiday, and we can leave the future alone—for the present."

CHAPTER II

THE quaint old house in which Nathaniel Targett lived and carried on his business stood in the main street of Dane Hill village. His father, George Targett, had bought the property and settled down there as a solicitor some fifty years before, and had never had any reason to regret his choice of a practice; the county families patronised him in business, and socially looked on him almost as an equal. On the death of George Targett his sons inherited a very fair patrimony: the eldest, Nathaniel, taking up the business where his father had left it, and, being naturally shrewd and far-seeing, increased its profits and connections very considerably. Nathaniel Targett at fifty-five was a wealthy man, as country solicitors go, and could have retired had he desired to do so, but his home and his business were so much a part of his own being that he never felt the slightest inclination to give up the practice of his profession.

When George Targett bought the property the only entrance to the grounds lay in a long, rambling lane, quite half a mile from the village, while the back windows of the house overlooked the principal street. With admirable forethought, he knocked down a portion of the wall at the rear of the building, built a porch and door and made it the business entrance, where a brass board announced "Targett & Son, Solicitors," the former entrance still remaining a handsome, and even imposing

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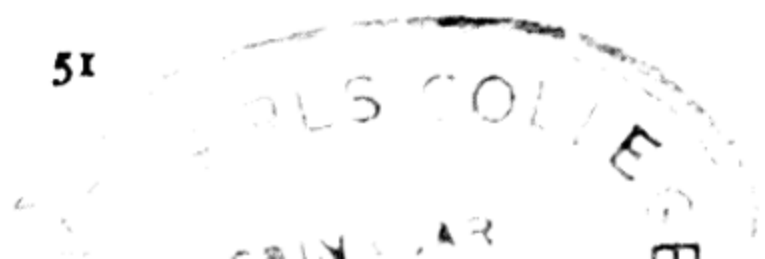
private approach. From this point of view the old house looked lovely—a Gloire de Dijon covered part of the walls, and climbing roses and Virginia creeper were clustered thickly over the pillared portico. The bow windows opened to the ground, and the lawns surrounding the building on all sides were perfect marvels of smooth greenness. A fairly large garden lay beyond the lawns, and the carriage-drive was bordered by a fine avenue of trees. From the village, "Dane Hill Lodge," as George Targett had named his residence, looked a very ordinary grey stone building, but from the front entrance it struck every one as an unusually picturesque, cheerful and well-kept house, that any man might be proud to call his home. Compared with Farraday Hall, Dane Hill Lodge was as the village pond compared to an inland lake, but even Sir Alec himself had expressed a laughing wish that he could tack the little property on to his own large possessions, adding that it would make an ideal dower-house, or a marriage gift for one of his three daughters. Sir Alec's remark had warmed Nathaniel's heart, for he was greatly attached to his home, this affection standing only second to the love he bore to his nephew and adopted son George. The young man's history is quickly told. His father had been Nathaniel's only brother, his mother was the sole love of Nathaniel's youth, the girl he had wooed and hoped to make his wife. When his brother obtained the love he had striven for, he did not grudge him his happiness, and, with a rare generosity, never changed in his affection for him and the kindness he showed towards him. Young George's father had been by no means a steady man, and he ran through his money, his wife's patience, and his own health in a few years. When he died his widow would have starved but

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for Nathaniel. He kept her in comfort till her death, and took her only child George to be as his own son. George had never felt the want of parents; Nathaniel loved his foster-son far more devotedly than many parents love their own offspring. The young man had so far shown no signs of his father's wasteful character, and, up to the time of his visit to America, had never given Nathaniel a single moment of anxiety. During the past two or three years the old man had noticed a new influence at work in his nephew's character. His long and regular letters home revealed this fact, and latterly his correspondence had become less and less communicative as regards his feelings and ideas, and gave only the details of occurrences and incidents. This had aroused Nathaniel's suspicions, and he urged the return of his nephew. George replied, suggesting that he would like to set up an American practice, and urging a very fine medical appointment that had been offered to him. But this Nathaniel would not hear of, and after six years' absence George had returned, older and wiser in experience of every kind.

The day following his arrival a letter came with an invitation from Lady Mary Farraday, asking Nathaniel and George to dinner on the coming Saturday evening, which they both accepted.

A new idea was suddenly born in Nathaniel's mind, and it brought hope and peace with it. He nursed it in the secrecy of his own heart, and worked deftly and patiently, trusting to time and the blessed chance of propinquity, to bring it about. With this end in view he sent George up to the Hall to call on Lady Mary one afternoon before they dined there, and on his return asked him what reception they had given him, and what he thought of the Farradays as a family.



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The young man was not enthusiastic.

"Everything was just the same as I can remember it when I was a boy. I find it difficult to realise that anybody can remain in the same groove for so many years. They are all behind the times and frightfully old-fashioned; nice enough, too, but very slow. The whole lot of them have no interest outside their own circle, and seem to be perfectly happy in a mutual admiration society. Lady Mary is a fine-looking woman and wears well, in spite of her large family, but she struck me as being very narrow-minded; she told me that she could not give Miss Margery a season in London because her youngest child was delicate and had to remain in the country. Such rot, as if people cannot leave their children with servants. Just imagine, when I suggested that she should leave the kid behind and give Miss Margery her season in town, she looked horrified, and Miss Margery herself got wild and jumped on me."

"Humph!" remarked Nathaniel. "I can see that you found them dull and uninteresting. Did you meet Tom?"

"The heir apparent? Oh yes, I met him. He is treated as a national hero. He has returned from his first term at Cambridge and is suffering from a swollen head. I felt inclined to kick him."

"Dear me!" thought Nathaniel to himself; "this is not encouraging, so far. He has quarrelled with Margery and wants to kick Tom—and finds Lady Mary dull."

"And whom else did you see?" he added aloud.

"Sir Alec was out, but there was a person called Frizzie and a crowd of children that had sprung up since my time. It made me feel quite an old man to see all those youngsters. They were all having tea out of doors. I suppose it is my own fault, but I felt quite lost in all the clatter and noise."

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"Frizzie is the governess. She went to Farraday Hall just after you left the country to study in London, and has been there ever since. Every one likes her, she is a sweet, unselfish little soul. Her real name is Miss Clare Williams, but Miss Margery nicknamed her Frizzie—and Frizzie she has remained."

"Margery always hit on stupid names for things, even as a child," replied George, unconsciously dropping the formal Miss as he recalled her as the playfellow of his boyhood. "I remember we once found a lovely quiet little nook and a small sandy cave, out in the woods. I wanted to call it Ali-baber, or the Robbers' Den, but she insisted on calling it the Fairy Island, and so it had to remain, although I pointed out to her with severity that it had nothing to do with fairies or islands. That was Margery all over, very obstinate and wrong-headed."

"No one could understand why she nicknamed Miss Williams, Frizzie; I don't suppose the child knew herself, but just went on a general law of opposites, for the governess is quiet and demure, and always looks to me like a little Quakeress in her neat grey dress."

"Nunc," said George, giving his uncle a keen look, "you are certainly very loud in your praises of Miss Frizzie, I am afraid I shall have to regard her as a rival in your affections."

"Did I not tell you that every one was fond of her? I am no exception to the rule. She quite deserves all the affection she gets, bless her heart!"

"I must be careful," said George laughing. "This renowned heart breaker may captivate me too, and then it would be very serious."

"I fancied your heart was disposed of elsewhere," remarked Nathaniel quietly.

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The red flush mounted to George's face, but he turned his troubled eyes on his uncle and looked the old man straight in the face.

"I certainly admire a certain lady friend," he answered, "and I respect her very highly, so much so that I must beg of you not to discuss her or my affection for her. It would be a caddish thing for me to let you think lightly of her, when she is what she is."

"I beg your pardon, my boy. I certainly never thought anything but the very best of you."

"And I certainly don't deserve it, whereas she is a perfect woman. Perfect in form and perfect in heart. Would you like to see her photo?"

"Indeed I would," answered Nathaniel readily, glad to have broken down the young man's reserve and his disinclination to talk about Mrs. Ephraim Reubens.

George went up to his room and brought down a life-sized photo of the head and bust of a woman. He placed it in front of his uncle without saying a word and the old man sat and gazed at it in silence.

The face of the woman in the photograph was radiantly beautiful, even in the coldness and hardness of black and white. Her eyes were wonderful, large, soft and tender, with almost unfathomable sadness in their depths. Her hair was parted in the middle and lay in natural waves on either side of her head. Her forehead and brow had the look of a saint, but her mouth was human, sweetly human, with soft and gracious curves.

"No woman could be anything but good with a face like that," said Nathaniel with a sigh; "I have never seen any one more lovely in my life."

"She is the most beautiful woman in the world,"

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answered George with a quiet conviction. "She is known in America as the lovely Mrs. Reubens."

"She has a very sad face. Is her married life a happy one?"

"Oh, it's happy enough, as married lives go, nowadays. Ephraim is not suited to her, and never could be; still, I don't think I would call her unhappy. Ezra is devoted to her, he lavishes his wealth on her, and is unstinted in his generosity to her. For her sake he puts up with Ephraim, and pays his debts, over and over again."

Nathaniel did not discuss the Reubens any more that day. He saw nothing but danger ahead for his boy if this friendship with Ezra continued. He stifled down a sigh, and beautiful as was the unconscious face of Mrs. Ephraim, he felt he hated her. When George had taken the photograph away, and he was free from the magnetism of its loveliness, he realised how strong was the attraction that this woman could exert, even in cold print. He shuddered when he thought of what her power must be in flesh and blood, and, above all, to the man she cared for.

"Heaven grant that her heart may not be set on George. God help him! It would be a terrible temptation."

The dinner at Farraday Hall turned out more interesting than George expected. The country physician, Dr. Legate, had been asked to meet them, and being a clever, vivacious man, with a fund of humour, kept the dinner table very lively. George also related anecdotes of American life, and spoke modestly and yet with ease.

He created a very good impression, and when Dr. Legate rose to leave, as he had to rush away directly

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after dinner to an urgent case, he clapped George on his shoulder in passing.

"You'll do, boy, you'll do. Don't let them turn your head for you in London—that's all."

George flushed with pleasure, for Dr. Legate was justly held in very high estimation by all his patients and friends, and praise from him was praise indeed.

He happened to look up and meet Miss Margery's eyes as the doctor spoke to him; a spark and a flash showed him that the girl echoed the sentiments of admiration. George felt at peace with the whole world and very well pleased with himself. To his own intense surprise he felt a thrill run through him at the glance from Margery's blue eyes. He was young enough to revel in it as a new and unexpected sensation, especially as he had imagined that all his heart was irretrievably disposed of to another woman.

After dinner Sir Alec and Lady Mary challenged Frizzie and Nathaniel to a game of bridge, and this it seemed was a regular institution, and the four players very keen on their game.

George joined Margery and Tom and the three young people stood chatting before the open French windows.

"It is a beautiful night, so warm and sweet," said Margery, sniffing in the mild evening air. "Don't you find the country—and England—delightful after America? I am sure you never have such lovely summer nights as this?"

"I liked my stay in America very much, Miss Margery; but I am very glad to be back again, and to meet my old friends," he replied, giving her a glance.

"Don't you play the banjo or sing?" asked Tom.

"I'm afraid I don't. I am very fond of music, I even

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like a gramophone or a brass band—can you do anything in that line?”

“I’m rather good at the banjo, but Margery sings and plays, she’s quite good. Go on, Marnie, give us a song with a good chorus.”

“Let us hear Miss Margery alone first, and then we can have a chorus after. Please, Miss Margery, will you sing something?”

The girl rose from her seat near the window and went over to the piano, a slender little figure in white muslin with red roses in her belt.

To George’s surprise she sang exceedingly well, and played with execution and finish. She had chosen a dainty little French *chanson*, with a sweet refrain. Seated at the piano the candles threw a glow over her face and lit up her hair like a halo. With a sudden quick pulse of his heart George realised how sweet, fair and innocent she looked, and how much he had cared for her when she was a child. He understood, too, dimly and vaguely, that she was, in some inexplicable manner, entwined in the very tenderest fibres of his heart, almost as if she were a part of his own being.

“It must be because I liked her so much when she was a little kid that I am still so fond of her; she is a dear little girl, a sweet, true, innocent little girl,” and he sighed; he suddenly felt as if she were a long way from him.

Nathaniel begged another song when she ceased singing; he asked her to sing an old favourite of his, the Flight of Ages, and the girl complied. Even as he sat with feelings of admiration and affection in his heart for the sweetheart of his boyhood, the air of the song brought back other memories to George’s mind and evoked another vision. He saw another face at another piano, and pas-

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sionate pleading expressed by a full rich voice ; he saw himself bending over the singer, catching the red lights in her dark hair and the satin gleam from her bare shoulders, he saw the soft scarlet lips raised to his. He gave a start as Margery returned to her seat. The past had been so vividly present, and although the passion it expressed looked tawdry and cheap in the present calm and dignified surroundings, still the passion had been real enough—in the past.

"Thank you very much," he murmured mechanically. Tom had brought out his banjo and was singing to his own accompaniment. How the bridge players could continue to play amid such a noise was a marvel to George, who forgot that they were so absorbed in their game that it made very little difference to them.

Margery sat with her hands folded in her lap, a habit of her childhood which still clung to her, and looked at George with curious eyes.

"Your thoughts were far away, Mr. Targett, while I was singing that last song. You looked as if all your present surroundings had vanished, and that you could see something none of us could see."

The girl's intuition struck him, but he tried to pass off the subject with a light laugh.

"Are you a thought reader, or a prophetess, Miss Margery?"

"Neither, your face betrayed you. You were so deeply engrossed in your own thoughts that you did not hear when I stopped playing. I hope the music brought you pleasant thoughts?"

Her shy eyes, clear and innocent as a child's, were raised questioningly to his face. He felt the tell-tale red flush mounting to his brow, and for the first time he realised

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acutely that he was ashamed of his past passion, and wished he could honestly meet the girl's eyes.

"How could I help having pleasant thoughts when you were singing and playing so sweetly," he answered evasively.

The girl gave a soft laugh. "I was singing and playing so sweetly that you did not even listen to me, or notice when I stopped. I don't believe you could even tell me the name of my song," she said with derision.

He gave a keen look and saw the first gleam of a woman's soul shining out of the girl's eyes.

"Don't be hard on me, Miss Margery, you never used to say cruel things when we played together ten years ago. And don't think that your singing was to blame for my wandering thoughts. Some music has the effect of suddenly recalling scenes and persons we had almost forgotten, and the very melody of the air, although we may not know its name, may make a past incident very vividly and really present, is it not so?" He tried to force a tone of light gaiety into his voice but it was not a great success.

"I don't know," the girl answered gravely. "I feel very stupid when you talk like that. I have no memories that music would recall. Do you know I have never been to a dance yet, a real dance for grown-up people, with programmes and all that, only Cinderella parties for young people," she gave a little impatient sigh.

He looked down at the bent head and the little white fingers that were playing with a rose she had taken from a neighbouring vase. Her words called up a vista of thought—it was an unconscious revelation Margery made of how sheltered and guarded had been her short life. He saw, with a sudden access of humility and a conscious-

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ness of his own unworthiness, what a pure, white little soul was enshrined in the girl's dainty form.

"You should be very thankful that you have no memories—memories are often only regrets, and regrets poison and embitter life. Very few of us have only happy memories and no regrets. I envy you the absence of both. You know the old saying, Happy is the country that has no history."

"It's an old saying, I know, but I pity the country with such a monotonous fate; it must be dreadfully slow and uninteresting. I only wish some history would happen in my life, every day is the same here."

"God forbid you should wish for changes," he said earnestly. "Fate has a nasty knack of taking us at our word, and when it's too late we're sorry we spoke. Speaking of memories though, I hope you will not be vexed, Miss Margery, if I tell you that the happiest ones of my life are those of our childhood days. I have never forgotten my little companion and playfellow."

Margery did not answer; a strange, unaccustomed little flutter at her heart kept her silent.

"Had you forgotten me, Miss Margery? Do you remember you used to call me Georgy Porgee?"

The girl's cheeks were redder than the roses at her waist, but she found her tongue at last and managed to say:—

"I remember you very well, Mr. Targett; you were always so kind to me, and you always took my part in everything, don't you remember? How could I have forgotten you?"

"Ten years is a long time, and you were only eight. I never dared to hope that you had thought of me all this long time. Still, I am more than pleased to find that I

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am not forgotten. It makes my home-coming so much sweeter to me."

When George and Margery parted that night they both felt that the gulf of years had been bridged over and they could never feel as strangers to each other again. They both knew and realised a great joy and contentment in each other's society, but neither understood that the cornerstone had been laid in the foundations of the temple of their love. Nathaniel chattered all the way home, eagerly describing his various hands, and how skillfully he had manipulated a very poor set of cards. George strode along beside him, his hands in his pockets, putting in an occasional ejaculation to his uncle's garrulity, but with his thoughts in a whirl. He was keenly aware of a new element, strong and sweet and pure, that, like the leaven of the Gospel, was changing and altering every idea, theory and fact of his life. The turmoil of his spirit was so great that, on reaching his room, he paced up and down, trying to restore the chaos of his thoughts into order. The room seemed to cramp and stifle him. Nathaniel heard him creep downstairs about midnight and let himself quietly out of the front door.

The old man turned over in bed with a smile on his lips. "He'll do, bless him, as Legate said to-night, he'll do. He'll wrestle with himself and face everything squarely and start fresh again. Dear little Margery, bless her pretty face, bless them both," and with this prayer in his heart the old man slept peacefully.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Nathaniel met George at breakfast the following morning he made no allusion to the midnight walk the young man had taken, and was relieved to think that there could be nothing seriously wrong with his nephew when he observed the hearty breakfast he was able to put away.

"You will want to do some riding, I expect. I am using Lena in the gig, but if you would care to try Dandy-boy he is at your disposal. He is a bit too fresh for me, but I hope he will suit you all right."

"That's awfully good of you, Nunc. Are you sure you can spare Dandy-boy? he is a perfect beauty, I was looking at him the other day, but he wants a lot of work to keep him in condition."

"Lena is quite sufficient for me, my boy, and I have only short distances to go for the next few days. In case I require Dandy-boy to take me to Fletching, or Forest Row, I will let you know."

During the following week George had several opportunities of meeting Tom and Margery, and the young people had long rides together through the pleasant country roads. Sir Alec sometimes accompanied them, but he was a very busy man, and would seldom spare a whole morning or afternoon to mere amusement. He

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managed his large estate entirely unaided, and personally superintended every detail in the working of it. Margery and Tom often took George back to tea with them at the Hall, and he was quickly on his old footing of intimacy with all its inmates. Gently and inperceptibly his feelings for Margery deepened and intensified day by day, and, as wise old Nathaniel had predicted, propinquity, and the frank open comradeship the girl showed him, drew his heart and his thoughts so completely away from the other woman he had cared for that he sometimes found it difficult to realise that he had once thought himself irrevocably and passionately in love with beautiful Mrs. Ephraim Reubens.

One afternoon a heavy shower sent them back from their ride earlier than usual, and as Lady Mary had driven out to pay some calls, George was taken up to the school-room, where a substantial tea was in process.

Afterwards he joined in a game of romps with all the children, and found they were not so dull and uninteresting on a closer acquaintanceship. Cicely, the eldest of the nursery group, was a big, fine-looking girl, already as tall and broad as Margery, although only fourteen. She was of a placid, even disposition, with a temper it was impossible to ruffle, in features and in character closely resembling her mother, and differing widely from passionate, excitable Margery. "The virtues of the family are condensed into Cicely," Tom was fond of remarking whenever he or Margery was found out and punished for childish faults. Physically, Cicely was perfect. Sir Alec often stopped to admire her beautiful body and limbs as she ran, or rode, or followed her brothers in climbing and jumping, but at the same time he loved best the stormy wilful lass whose delicately fashioned little body seemed all too fragile for the indomitable spirit it held.

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"Cicely is all sense, but Margery is all feeling," he would say, holding them both in his arms.

The afternoon that George had tea in the schoolroom the children were discussing a picnic they had been promised to Ashdown Forest.

"We used to go there years ago, do you remember, Miss Margery? You and Tom were put into my charge and I used to go grey trying to bring you both home without broken limbs."

"I am afraid I was a very naughty girl," said Miss Margery demurely.

"And she hasn't improved much since then either," remarked Tom with brutal brotherly candour.

"Do come with us, Mr. Targett, when we go for the picnic. You'll show us some lovely trees to climb, won't you?"

"I am afraid, Cicely, I have forgotten how to climb trees, but I should love to go with you when you go to the forest; it's a ripping place."

"Do come, Targett, I'll get the Mater to send you a line and old Targett too, and we'll go the next fine day there is. If I can manage it," added Tom, dropping his voice, "I'll make Mater leave all the kids at home." The following day dawned fine, warm and bright, and during breakfast a note was handed to Nathaniel from Lady Mary.

"She asks us both to drive out and meet her this afternoon at three o'clock at Ashdown Forest—the Larch Grove is the appointed spot. What do you say, George? Do you care to go? Will you drive me there in the gig? We could use Dandy-boy."

"Accept by all means, Nunc," said George readily. "It ought to be lovely out in the forest this afternoon."

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When George drove Nathaniel up to the meeting-place in Ashdown Forest the Farradays were already there.

Cicely and Tom rushed forward.

"Such rot," said the latter, "making this a kids' show. I wanted all the youngsters left at home, but Mater has dragged the whole boiling lot out with us. She always forgets that Margery and I are grown up."

George smiled appreciatively. Tom looked exceedingly youthful in his flannels and a gorgeously new college blazer and cap.

"We're going bug-hunting," added Cicely, in her shrill girlish treble. "Mr. Targett, do come along with us!" Needless to say she was addressing George; Nathaniel had gone forward to shake hands with Lady Mary, who was seated on a pile of rugs and cushions, superintending the laying of the tea-cloth.

"I am so sorry Dad could not come," said Margery. "He was called away at the last moment. Dad is always working, it seems to me."

"Come bug-hunting with us," pleaded Cicely, clinging to George's arm.

"I am not a bit keen on bugs, really," he had to assure her gently.

"I love them, so does Alec. Last time we were here we caught a lovely green beetle. We've brought a tin to keep our bugs in. Alec keeps his in his pockets, but Frizzie gets so waxy if I keep anything in mine. Well, come on Alec, let's go, it's no use waiting till it gets dark." Alec and Cicely, armed with a trowel and an empty tin, set off in their search for specimens for the natural history class.

"Tea won't be ready for another hour yet," said Frizzie. "Tomkins has only just got the twigs and sticks to-

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gether and it will take a fairly long time for the kettle to boil."

Nathaniel seated himself beside Lady Mary, watching Miss Williams' neat grey figure as she flitted about helping to get the tea spread out.

"I always think an outing to the forest does us all a world of good, the scent of the pine-trees is so healthy," said Lady Mary. "You young people had better stroll about and show Mr. George all your favourite nooks; he has not been here for years."

They needed no second bidding. From the more open spaces at the fringe of the wood they plunged into the dense, cool twilight. Under foot the moss was like a soft velvet carpet, around on all sides the trunks of the trees rose in clear and stately shafts, and overhead the interlacing branches formed a dome of ever variably and ever beautiful design.

"Oh, I do love this place," said Margery, stopping and drawing a deep breath. "It is just like a fairy-tale, I am sure anything could come true in a forest like this. It is no wonder that Tom and I used to play at the Enchanted Stag, and Ib and little Christina, and Hansel and Gretel. I feel as if I could play again now, don't you, Tom?"

"I'm too old for rotting," said the young man with lofty disdain. "It's only girls that can play at fairy tales."

"I don't know," said George meditatively. "I think that some people can never grow old, and some are never young. I also feel as if I could play Hansel and Gretel again, and make you the old witch, and push you into the bramble bushes."

They laughed heartily, and the sound carried far, and then came back to them in a muffled echo. Margery shivered. "How eerie and strange that sounded. I feel

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as if I had laughed in church. This is something like a cathedral, is it not?" she asked, glancing up at the green dome.

"Yes, it is certainly very awe inspiring. As you say, it seems almost a desecration to talk and laugh aloud."

"What bally rot! I can't say I feel a bit as if I were in a church. Just because it's quiet—and er—peaceful—you go and get the cathedral idea into your head. I'm jolly hungry and vote we go back to tea."

They paused and looked around them. They had reached a spot where the path they were following branched off in two directions.

"Have you any idea where we are? I don't seem to remember my way. Have we any definite place in view?" asked George.

"I know the way back, at any rate. If we take the upper path here we shall cross over the rocks and come out on the top of the ridge, and can scramble straight down to where Mater is sitting with the tea-things."

"That sounds very nice; by all means, Tom, lead us on to the upper ridge, and the descent from thence to the Larch Grove will be like the charge of the Light Brigade, and we shall inspect what there is left of us. Left of three of us—our clothes, of course, I mean."

Margery looked at her spotless white dress and sighed.

"Frizzie wanted me to wear my old holland, but I wouldn't; I always feel sorry afterwards when I don't take her advice."

The path they followed became less and less definable, to George it seemed there was no way at all, but Tom went manfully forward, and the others followed him hopefully. The ground was so steep and so uneven that Margery kept on tripping over her long dress, and finally

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gathered it up closely around her, giving an enchanting view of her slim ankles. George sometimes had to stop and put out his hand to hold aside some low growing shrubs, or overhanging boughs, to clear the way for her, and caught sweet fleeting little glances from beneath the broad brim of her hat. Hot and breathless, they finally came out on the rocks at the top of the first ridge. They all sat down to get their breath, and Margery took off her hat to fan herself.

"Now, here we are," said Tom with some pride. "Isn't it jolly up here? Going down won't take us ten minutes."

"Not far from here is the Magic Carpet, don't you remember, Mr. Targett? When Tom and I were little we used to sit on the carpet and wish—and you used to wish too."

"I remember perfectly, Miss Margery. Do you think you could find your way there, Tom? If the magic hasn't failed we might try our luck there again."

"Yes, let's," said Margery, jumping up, and reverting to the phraseology of her childhood.

"Come on, I know the way; only it's all rot about wishing, and all that sort of stuff."

Tom led them recklessly over steep and slippery rocks until he stopped at a spot where the surrounding crags hollowed down into a shallow cup or basin, completely covered with vivid emerald-green moss—soft and spongy.

"Let us do it properly," said Margery, her eyes shining with excitement. "We must all hold hands and step on the carpet together, and we mustn't speak a word while we are on the moss."

Gravely they all joined hands and advanced on the "carpet," Tom walking backwards, and, rigidly following

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an old Sussex superstition, they all bobbed three times before they sat on the ground to wish.

George suddenly found himself wishing that Margery would love him; the fact that he desired this came as a shock to him, and a revelation of his inconstancy. A feeling of nausea and disgust swept over him—the dead-sea apples of passion always leave a bitter taste in the mouth.

Margery's mind was so confused that for a moment she scarcely knew what she would wish for—then the faintest little tremble came from George's hand to hers, and she became conscious that an overwhelming desire seemed to flood her soul and whole being—the desire that George would love her. No realisation of her own feelings came with this wish, she scarcely dared to analyse or put into definite words the sweet vague longings of her heart.

Tom sat and wriggled and dug his heels into the moss. He wanted a heap of things—a new hunter, a motor-car,—then he became suddenly grave, and wished heartily that his usually indulgent father would not cut up rough over his last batch of debts at college.

Margery gave a soft laugh at they stepped back on the rocks again. In silence they turned to retrace their steps, each busy with their own thoughts.

“I almost wish I could be ten years old again,” grumbled Tom. “It's a beastly nuisance being grown up, with trials and worries and all that.”

Margery stopped in alarm and laid her hand on Tom's arm. “Surely you have no trials and worries, Tom? You haven't got into any scrape at Cambridge, have you?”

Tom growled an unintelligible reply, and tried to shake off the pleading hand.

“I'm a bit older than you, old chap; come and ask me

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if you find yourself in a hole. Cambridge is a beastly place for a rich man's son."

"That's just it," complained Tom, glad of any decent excuse. "They know the Pater is rich and they all expect me to go the pace. Personally, I don't care two figs for wine parties, and dinners, and cards—but I have to follow the crowd, you know, or they say nasty things, and wonder where you've been dragged up, and who the dickens you are. I have really very simple tastes," went on the boy earnestly; "I love sports, and games, and hunting—but I'm hanged if I care for all those other things, and they carry off a deuce of a lot of money. It's not all cakes and ale at college, I can tell you."

"Why don't you join the swotting set, Tom? I've never been to Cambridge myself, but I had a term or two at Oxford, and so I know something about it."

"I couldn't be a swotter," interrupted Tom contemptuously.

"It's better to be looked down on as a beastly swotter than to go playing little Harry all round, like the other set. It pays much better in the long run. Try and chuck the lot you have got in with, Tom; from what you say they must be a rapid set, and you are much too good for them."

"I'm all right, I've got my head screwed on the right way. I'm not such a mug as they think, only it's just that a fellow doesn't want to be different to the other chaps—see? Now Margery, don't split. I'll tell the Pater myself, before I go back; but don't you say a word."

"All right, Tom, but ——"

"Just say: 'I won't tell, *honest injun*,'" growled Tom.

"Honest injun, Tom," repeated Margery obediently.

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"You know I never tell anything you tell me, and besides you haven't said yet exactly what is the matter."

"Come along now, let's get back to Mater. It'll be a fine lark scrambling down this hill."

With a war-whoop of delight Tom plunged into the thick brushwood and the others followed, laughing and breathless, as they tripped, slipped, tumbled, and scrambled headlong down the precipitous side of the ridge. When they emerged and met the startled eyes of Tomkins, who was boiling the kettle for tea, they realised that their appearance must be somewhat dishevelled, to say the least of it.

Margery's sleeve was torn and showed a white arm with a scarlet scratch across it; her skirt had lost half a flounce and the unruly waves of her hair were escaping from truant hairpins and wandering over her shoulders.

"Oh, that was rippin'," said George, drawing a long breath, his cheeks glowing and his eyes dancing with the exertion. "The pace was lovely—I thought every moment I was going head over heels on the top of Marnie." The old name had slipped out unconsciously.

"You've split your coat right across the shoulders, sir," remarked Tomkins in a horrified whisper.

"Can't be helped," laughed George as they joined the rest of the party.

Every one did full justice to the plates of sandwiches, brown bread and butter, and home-made cakes—afterwards Tomkins handed round the strawberries and cream. Alec had been lying on his stomach while taking his tea, but when that useful organ absolutely refused to hold another morsel he turned reluctantly over. As he did so he put his ear to the ground.

"Well, our wily scout, can you hear the distant tread

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of enemies on the war path? Are they Red Indians to-day, or merely Zulus?" teased Tom.

"Well, I can't tell from here what they are exactly, but I fancy—I think—it sounds like one or two people walking along the road very slowly."

"Nonsense, Alec," grumbled Cicely, who was also lying with her ear to the ground. "I can't hear a sound."

"Wait a bit," said the boy, proud of the attention he was receiving; "I can tell you something more, one of the people is gammy-legged, and they are walking very slowly."

"Really, Mater, you did not know we had a Sherlock Holmes in the family, did you? O wise young man, how I do honour thee!" jeered Tom.

"But Alec has really a wonderful sense of hearing," said Lady Mary, who considered each one of her children a genius.

"Most probably they passed some people and a lame man while they were bug-hunting, and hence the wonderful gift of prophetic hearing vouchsafed to the scout," teased Margery.

"No, upon our honour, we never saw a soul, and we didn't catch much to-day either. We've only got two kinds of earwigs, some beetles, and some little wriggly things I don't know the name of." Cicely's voice was a shrill treble, and her remarks interrupted Miss Williams and Nathaniel, who were engaged in a very interesting conversation.

"I hope you've got them all in a safe place?" asked Frizzie apprehensively.

"Oh, yes, they're all in the tin, and I put my gloves inside to keep them in safely, and a stone on the top."

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Frizzie could not repress an involuntary shudder.

Alec lifted his head from the ground and announced: "Now, you'll see whether I'm rotting. There are two people coming towards us along the forest road, and one of them is limping."

"Really he seems a very perfect Sherlock Holmes," said Nathaniel with admiration, as a couple of tramps came in sight from the quarter Alec had indicated.

The wayfarers, a man and a woman, approached them slowly, the man limping painfully and walking with the aid of a stick, the woman carrying a bundle, and a sickly-looking baby in her shawl.

Lady Mary's kind heart was touched, she got up and went along the road to meet them.

"We have just finished tea," she said, in her genial manner to the tramps, "let me give you some sandwiches and cakes, and some milk for the baby."

The man turned his swarthy face to her and she saw he was, partially at any rate, a gipsy. The woman, with her large earrings, hooked nose and dark eyes, looked of Jewish extraction.

"Thank you kindly," answered the man, "we have been tramping now for three days. I am seeking work in the hop-gardens, but we have far to go yet—and I am lame."

Willing hands gathered together the *débris* of the feast—some of which they packed up in a parcel for the tramps to carry away with them.

Margery made them cups of tea with her own hands, and Frizzie warmed some milk for the baby.

Tomkins looked on the proceedings with lofty disdain, his faithful soul was overwrought at the spectacle of the "quality" ministering to the needs of dirty, homeless tramps, and above all, gipsies. He hovered officiously in

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the background, with strong disapproval marked on his rubicund features, ready at a word, or sign, to drive off the intruders with ignominy.

"I think you had better have the horses put in, Tomkins, and the hampers packed again," said Lady Mary, who suspected his intentions. He turned away obediently and with a regretful sigh left his mistress to her fate. The tramps had seated themselves some distance away, while they thankfully partook of the meal the children spread before them. Nathaniel found an opportunity to walk over, and unostentatiously slipped half a sovereign into the man's hand.

After they had finished the tramp got up and limped to where Lady Mary was sitting.

"You have been very kind to us, ladies and gents, 'taint often we gets such kindness on the road. We both of us thanks you from our hearts." He paused looking at the happy faces of the group round Lady Mary, and a diffident smile came over his pinched face. "Maybe some of you would like your fortunes told? Not for money, young gent," as Tom pulled a handful of silver out of his pocket. "I can tell fortunes by reading the lines of the hand, and I'll be glad to read them, for your kindness to me and 'Liza and the little 'un."

Fortune-telling will never grow stale, curiosity concerning the future does not confine itself to irresponsible youth. Frizzie and Nathaniel stood up as eagerly as the children.

"Do tell mine," said Margery shyly, as her small pink palm lay in his brown one. He looked at it long and earnestly.

"Young lady, you are rich and well beloved. You have never known a sorrow or a care. Soon the dearest

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desire of your heart will be fulfilled, but, for the space of one year, great sorrow will fall upon you. You must be brave and faithful; you have one lover now, you will soon have two. You will be married by the end of next year, and your children will bring great comfort to your mother."

Margery blushed violently, and pulling her hand away ran and hid her scarlet cheeks behind Lady Mary's shoulder.

"Good gracious! Fancy Marnie with a lover, and a husband and children," exclaimed Cicely, opening her wide grey eyes. "Fancy all that for Marnie: and what for me?"

"Your hand is young, and your lines are not set yet. I cannot tell you very much, but you will always have health and wealth; you have a happy life and a happy heart, even sorrow will fall very easy on you. You will marry a rich man—that is all I can read as yet."

"And quite enough too," said Frizzie severely, "for a child of fourteen."

"Thank goodness," said Cicely, gleefully turning a pirouette on her heel, "thank goodness, sorrow will fall easy on me. I needn't be so frightened of Frizzie, when I don't do my German exercise."

The rich husband had gone completely out of her head.

"For you, miss," he said, studying the pale, crossed palm of Frizzie's hand, "I have neither a husband nor wealth. You have had to toil, and sorrow has been your lot, but you will never know want again, and your last days will be happy and peaceful."

"Then we shall all be dead," said Alec with conviction.

The gipsy took up George's hand and frowned as he followed the lines on the palm. "You will be perhaps

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a piano-player? or"—as Tom laughed with derision—"a doctor; your fingers are delicate and yet very strong. You have not been rich, but you have never been poor, and in the future you will have as much wealth as you can desire. You have been abroad and had many adventures. A dark lady is in love with you; her influence is evil, very bad. You will have much trouble about her yet. You love a maiden, and you will win her for your wife, but great trouble lies in your path. Only through sorrow, and the misfortune of your sweetheart, will you win her for your wife. You have a danger threatening you," he added, dropping his voice, "beware of the dark lady's husband."

The last remark left George looking completely mystified.

"Now what shall I get?" asked Tom merrily.

For a few minutes the gipsy did not speak, and he looked very puzzled as he examined both of Tom's hands. Then he said:—

"Young gent, you must forgive me if I say things you don't like, I only say what I see here. You are living in riches and happiness, but your riches don't belong to you. There is another young man, about your age, and he is the real owner of all your wealth and lands. When the winter is over this other young gent will sail from another land and will claim all your possessions. But fear not, you, too, will have trouble, and it will be good for you."

"Bally rot," said Tom in a temper.

"What an extraordinary man he is," remarked George.

Nathaniel's face looked troubled and he did not offer his hand to be read.

"Tell me, tell my's hand," said Baby Tots, the youngest of the Farraday's, a really beautiful and fascinating child.

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The gipsy smiled, and going down painfully on his knee took the baby palm in his. A look of horror suddenly crossed his features. He bent his head and kissed the little hand reverently, and when he stood up, tears were in his eyes. "May God keep you, lady," he said to Lady Mary in a husky voice "safe in your kingdom," pointing to the children all around her. "May God send you happiness and wealth, but, lady, take care of your angel," laying his hand lightly on Tots's golden curls. Then he limped away, and rejoining his wife they continued their journey.

"Well, of all the rum old gammy-legged chaps I've ever seen!" exclaimed Alec, "and he never even offered to look at my hand," holding out that member for inspection.

"He couldn't see it for the dirt that's on it," said Tom with brotherly frankness. "But he is a rotter, anyway. He's an old humbug and stuffed us all with a pack of lies."

Lady Mary held Tots in arms that trembled, and kissed her sweet face again and again.

"That man has quite unnerved me," she said as Tots protested against the embrace.

Nathaniel assisted her to rise, and offered no remark, he was more impressed than he cared to own.

"He was certainly a bit weird, and quite out of the usual run of fortune tellers," said George, "but I think he spoke in good faith. Give Tots to me, I'll carry her."

He lifted her to his shoulder and Tots was ecstatic with joy. "What's your name—nice mans?" she asked pressing her soft cheek to his forehead.

"When your sister, Miss Margery, was about your age she used to call me Georgy Porgee."

"Georgy Porgee puddeny-pie, kissed the girls and made them cry," cried Alec with glee.

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"I never made any girls cry, they always make me cry," said George ruefully.

"Don't be tross," coaxed Tots. "Never mind Alet. I loves Porgee mans," and her arms nearly throttled him.

With all the Farraday children George Targett was called "Porgee" ever after.

Tomkins was on the box of the landau and the groom was holding the pony trap as the party sauntered up to the broad road again. Lady Mary, Frizzie, Margery and Tom got in, and George put Tots into her mother's arms.

"Be careful, Cicely, how you drive home," shouted Tom as they started.

"I'll be at the back and keep her in order," shouted back George.

Cicely looked indignant, "As if I haven't always driven Mousie! Get in, Alec, and Jack, sit still, or I'll make you walk home."

George thought the groom looked very nervous as the pony started, and kept Dandy-boy following quietly until Mousie got over her freshness and settled to business in earnest.

"You're a splendid whip, Cicely, but mind you are careful driving home," said George as he turned off to drive to Dane Hill, while the pony carriage went on to Farraday Hall.

CHAPTER IV

"DEAR NATHANIEL,

"Your letter has been lying on my table for a week, awaiting a reply. During that time I have seriously considered all the questions you put to me: and, endeavouring to give you the very best advice, according to my poor ability, I now write to let you know what I think of the matter, as it appears to me.

"You very much desire that George, the young man you have adopted as your son, should obtain a practice as a surgeon or physician, and that he should be kept in ignorance of the fact that the proposal originated with you. In fine, you wish some one *outside* of your large circle of friends to offer the young man a good and lucrative opening in the medical profession.

"At first I smiled to myself at your delicacy of thought, and imagined that your reason must be the fear of making George feel overwhelmed with the favours you are lavishing on him. On seriously considering this point I changed my mind. You are not gifted with over-squeamishness of disposition and have always had a fine, healthy, moral outlook. Your reason for this strange request must then be really important and necessary. I wrote to my brother Charles, who is, as you know, the vicar of a parish in the East-end of London, and as he is in touch with so many members of the busy working world, I have no doubt that

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you will soon hear of an excellent opening for the young man, and he need never know whose hand has conferred this favour on him.

"As you justly remark, nothing (in the shape of a good practice) can be obtained without money—still your munificent offer has surprised me not a little. Many fathers would hesitate to lay out such a large sum of money, even on an only son. I have no doubt that, with this large inducement, a very brilliant opening may soon be found for George.

"Thank you, my dear Nathaniel, I am well but ageing fast. Every day brings me nearer to Eternity, and I have learned to long for that new life where our frail bodies will put off this troublesome 'mortal coil'. I am glad to learn that you are well and happy. May our Heavenly Father have you in his keeping.

"Forgive the errors in this epistle. Old age has laid its hand heavily on me, and my cramped fingers find it difficult to hold a pen.

"With ever affectionate remembrances,

"From your old friend,

"JAMES WOODBURN.

"ST. CUTHBERTS,

"LINCOLNSHIRE."

Nathaniel smiled as he folded up his old friend's letter and replaced it in the envelope. His most cherished plans seemed to be working to a successful termination, and his hopes in a fair way to be realised. He received the letter on his arrival home from the picnic to Ashdown Forest, and it seemed to him a very blessed termination to an unusually happy day. To his surprise another invitation to dinner followed within a week, and he wondered whether Sir Alec and Lady Mary noticed what he saw so clearly

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was going on, and marvelled a little that they should encourage George as they did. Still, that was their business, not his, and they could only blame themselves for throwing the young people together, if afterwards they found it was too late.

The latter end of July had been fine and dry, and it was an ideal summer's evening when George and Nathaniel went again to dine at Farraday Hall.

As usual Margery wore one of her simple white frocks, but she had piled her hair high over her face and pinned a scarlet rose in it.

Her loveliness that night took George by surprise. He had always thought her an uncommonly pretty and attractive girl, but without any claims to actual beauty. Yet on this occasion he reflected that she might compare with the loveliest women he had ever seen; and a spasm clutched his heart as his thoughts reverted to another woman he had hitherto regarded as the most beautiful of her sex. Lady Mary observed that Margery was looking prettier than usual, and woman-like put it down to the altered style of hair-dressing, and concluded that it suited her daughter very well. Margery looked that night as if she was the incarnate spirit of youth and mirth, her lips bubbling over with laughter and her eyes sparkling like diamonds; she radiated happiness, and her irrepressible vitality and overflow of spirits communicated itself to the others, and they all felt, mostly without being conscious of the fact, that the world was the best of all possible worlds, that everything was suddenly in tune, and life was good.

"Cicely wants us to go up to the school-room," announced Tom after dinner. "She wants to practise some of my banjo accompaniments. Will you come, George?"

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"I am afraid you will be very dull, these children are so selfish; don't go if you don't wish to, Mr. George; you must find this terribly slow and uninteresting after your gay life in New York."

"I prefer it a thousand times, Lady Mary," and sincerity rang in his voice. "By all means, Tom, let us have some music in the schoolroom. I am sure the bridge players will be very thankful."

Nathaniel gave a quiet smile, but offered no remark.

The schoolroom was on the second floor, a large, airy apartment with bow windows overlooking the terrace. A soft carpet covered the floor and big easy-chairs were scattered about. There were some beautiful pictures of child-life, mostly by Maud Goodman, on the walls, and a perfect gem of a piano.

"You may call this the schoolroom, by courtesy, but it might just as well be called the boudoir, or the little drawing room," George had remarked on his first visit upstairs.

Cicely rushed out with a shriek of delight to welcome them.

"Oh, how scrumptious of you to come! We were so beastly dull, and I never dreamt Tom would keep his word and bring you all up after dinner. We have just finished our exercises and Alec was going to bed. Let's dance, Marnie," and catching hold of her sister by the waist she flew round the room; Margery laughing and protesting, but keeping step with her.

"Marnie is quite helpless in the hands of the Young Giant," unwisely remarked Tom, and revealing thereby the pet-name Cicely went by in the bosom of the Farraday family. Cicely stopped her wild career round the room, threw Margery, not very gently, into the depths of an easy-chair, and calling Alec to her aid rushed at Tom.

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They had a rough and tumble for about ten minutes, from which Tom emerged collarless and tieless, but flushed and triumphant.

"You see, I'm still able to knock both of you into smithereens. That's enough ragging, Alec, let's have some music and behave properly. Can't imagine what you must think of my sister, Targett. Beastly bad form for a big girl of her age to romp like a boy." Tom's words came in gasps, as he was still breathless from the exertion.

"It seems to me that all of you are horribly spoilt, and do exactly as you like. You have a jolly time all round, I must say," replied George.

"Yes," answered Margery gently, "there's no doubt about that. We are all dreadfully spoilt. Dad and Mumsie would do anything for us. They have no happiness outside their own home; they have always thought of us first, and everything else after. I don't think we are half grateful enough, it's not every family that has such a Mater and Pater as we have. You don't know how good they are to us, Mr. Targett, and how happy we are," and she turned her soft, glowing face to his.

"I don't know," grumbled Alec; "I'm not very happy. It's jolly rough on a fellow when he wants to go to Eton to be made to mug up with a beastly old parson, and to be treated like a kid."

"Shut up, you rotter," said Tom. "When I was a baby, like you, I jolly well wasn't allowed to open my mouth. Look at him, Targett, ten last birthday, and talking like a blooming sixth-form boy."

The nursery babies, Jackie and Tots, came in their slippers and dressing gowns to say good-night, and after being stuffed with chocolates and kisses were reluctantly dragged away by a much-exasperated looking nurse.

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Margery seated herself at the piano, and the others gathered round her. They had chorus songs and comic songs and made as much noise as they possibly could, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, as healthy, irresponsible youth invariably does when left to find its own amusements.

"Come on, Marnie, give Cicely a chance, she's dying to play some of my accompaniments, and I like her playing better than yours, she doesn't jaw at a fellow like you do if I play a wrong note."

Margery laughed as she relinquished the piano stool to Cicely. They had a lamp on a side-table and candles on the piano, but the rest of the room was in darkness. Margery and George migrated almost unconsciously to the bow-window and stood for some time in silence, looking out into the dusky beauty of the night.

He bent towards her. "Do you know what to-day has meant for me?" he asked softly.

"To-day? no, what could it mean for you? Is it your birthday?" she tried to speak with cool indifference, but found her voice unaccountably shaky. The air was charged with electricity and they both felt it.

"I have realised many things to-day, and it means a turning-point in my life. I feel as if I had been asleep all my life, and have suddenly awakened. The past years feel like a shadowy dream, and only the present seems real. I don't know if you can understand me, Marnie; I don't know what you may think of me, but from to-day, in spite of whatever mistakes and errors have been in the past, I shall try and live so as—one day—some day—to be able to—to tell you—something."

He found he was expressing his thoughts very lamely and crudely, and his voice was husky and uncertain with

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emotion. He looked strangely unreal in the dim light, and Margery felt glad he could not see her blushes. She did not answer, she experienced the first emotion of her coming womanhood in a thrill that ran through all her veins and left her speechless. He tried to look into her downcast eyes, but the friendly dusk hid their shy sweetness.

"You are not angry, Marnie? You are not angry with me?" he asked, with an agony of alarm in his voice. "You don't think me too rude and forward, do you? We are old playfellows—and sweethearts, Marnie, we have kissed each other so often—long ago——" he paused, suddenly conscious how much he longed to kiss her at that present minute. "Marnie, you used to like me a little, tell me, you are not angry with me?"

"No, no," said a low voice, with a quivering note of happiness in it, "I am not angry."

"Never mind yer colour if yer heart ain't black," howled Tom and Alec from the piano.

Margery sat down on the broad window seat and felt suddenly bold enough to glance up at her tall young lover standing beside her.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked shyly.

"I would like to kneel," he said passionately, but noticing the little start she gave, and the apprehensive glance towards the piano, he sat down beside her in silence.

It was one of the most beautiful moments of their lives. Outside in the indigo sky a few pale stars were twinkling and the man and maiden sat side by side looking at them and thinking of each other. The current of George's passion ran through his veins like wine; his emotion, because repressed, was intensified, and the

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subtle influence of it swayed the heart of the girl, and caught her thoughts and flung them about like dry leaves in a whirlwind. They were conscious of each other, of their communion of thought, and sat in silence drinking in the sweetness of that wonderful hour. They felt as if Nature had made an invisible garment and wrapped it around them, leaving them alone inside to find each other, and to shut out the rest of the world.

He longed for some physical contact to express the passion of his heart ; he wanted only to touch her hand, or lay his fingers, ever so lightly, on her soft white dress, but he did not dare to risk it, he had ventured so much that night, and he knew that the girl beside him was but dimly conscious of her awakening love, even while she felt its sweet influence swathed around her whole being.

"Come out and walk with me in the garden," he whispered.

She nodded, and glided softly out of the room, George calling out as he followed her :—

"I say Tom, we're off for a bit of fresh air ; come on down when you've finished".

They wandered sedately through the lovely old Dutch garden, with its high box hedges, cut and clipped in many a quaint device.

"This is so beautiful," he murmured.

"Do you like it better than New York—or London?" she asked.

"London? London is an unknown land to me as yet—while here, I am in paradise," he answered.

"But you say nothing about New York. You must have had some very happy days and some good friends in America?" she persisted, with a girl's curiosity.

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A quick fear gripped his heart. What had she heard of America and of his friends there?

"It is quite true that I have had happy days—and at the time I daresay I considered them very jolly—but I have since realised that they fall far short of the days I have spent lately here—with you."

They wandered on, leaving the Dutch garden and descending the broad steps of the terrace.

"And your friends? Did you have many friends?" she asked, leading him along one of the side walks.

"Yes, I have had very kind friends; they all liked me much better than I deserved, but friends, however kind, cannot fill a man's life, and," suddenly looking down into her upturned face, "my heart is here."

A quick little catch of her breath was her only answer.

A few turns brought them into the rose garden, where the air was heavy with the scent of a hundred flowers.

"The roses are nearly over—we shall soon only have a few left—but are they not delicious?"

He stopped and looked at her, as she bent over a bush to smell one of her favourites.

"You look lovely with all these roses around you. You are more beautiful than all of them. Will you gather one for me, Marnie, as a souvenir of this evening?"

She stooped, and, with beating heart and blushing cheeks, gathered a red rose. Holding it towards him, she said, "Which kind do you like best—have you any special favourites?"

"I like best the one you have given me," he said, taking it and putting it to his lips, adding softly, "the red rose of my life, my Lady of the Garden."

"Well, you are a nice lot, you two," shouted Tom from

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across the rose trees. "Here we've been hunting for you everywhere."

"Why did you not come with us?" asked George. "Is it not lovely out here? Miss Margery has kindly been taking me all over the Dutch garden, and now we are admiring the roses."

"There are not many roses left—they were really splendid about a fortnight ago. You should have seen them; by Jingo, they were a sight."

"There are still some beauties left. The rose-garden, you know, Mr. Targett, is Dad's hobby," said Margery, as with Tom they stepped through the long French windows into the drawing-room.

"Well," said George, in a tone of solemn conviction, "I think it is the most beautiful rose-garden in the world."

"What rot. Old Charles Dudsworth has a much better one at his place. He always gets all the first prizes at the rose shows, and makes the Pater furious."

"Of course I've not seen Lord Dudsworth's, Tom, but I don't wish to see anything more beautiful than Sir Alec's rose-garden."

The bridge players had finished their third rubber, and Sir Alec overheard the last one or two sentences. His approval of George rose in leaps and bounds, and he said to his wife that night in their bedroom:—

"George Targett is a very fine young man. I always liked him, even as a boy. Old Targett was saying he expects that George will settle down in some practice in London. I am sure I hope he will get on, he deserves to."

"Yes, I like George, he is a dear boy and all the children like him. I am a little worried about Margery

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to-night, Alec dear, she is so flushed and her cheeks were burning when I kissed her good-night in bed."

"Marnie girl? She seemed all right at dinner, although, now you mention it, she certainly looked rather flushed. She may have been running about and got overheated."

"No, Alec dear, she had been in bed some time when I went in to kiss her. I am afraid, dear, the child is feverish."

"Give her a dose of magnesia in the morning, Mary love," said Sir Alec, as he prepared his portly form to slumber. Hence the first outward effect of Margery's love affair was a strong dose of magnesia, administered by her mother during the early hours of the following morning.

"Are you going out for another midnight walk?" asked Nathaniel, laughing, as they reached Dane Hill Lodge.

"Not much. At the same time, Nunc, I don't feel like sleeping immediately; if you are not too tired, sit up and have a cigar with me."

The old man readily agreed, and getting out the syphon and the whisky, they sat at the dining-room table, Nathaniel keeping up a desultory conversation, conscious all the while that there was a confidence forthcoming, or, at any rate, that there was something on George's mind he wished to communicate.

"You were out in the garden this evening," remarked the old man tentatively.

"Yes," answered George absently. "It was very beautiful."

"I rather thought Miss Margery looked extra pretty

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to-night; as a rule she is by no means beautiful—but she looked really quite lovely to-night.”

“Yes, didn’t she? I noticed it. And I don’t know how you can say she is not always beautiful—she is the prettiest girl I have even seen.”

Nathaniel smiled, his simple little bait had caught the fish.

“I thought you did not think much of her, at first,” he remarked quietly.

“Perhaps I was an ass. At any rate, Nunc dear, I have found out that there is only one woman in the world for me, and I am going to try all I know to get her—I mean Margery, of course.”

“George, my dear boy, I am delighted to hear this news. It is the best I have heard for days; but, forgive me for seeming to throw cold water on your hopes, do you anticipate no difficulty with Sir Alec?”

“You know him better than I do, of course, Nunc, but it has always struck me that he is a singularly unpretentious and single-minded man, who would consider his daughter’s happiness above wealth and position. I may be wrong, of course. And then, again, Nunc, I don’t intend to go begging for Margery until I have something to offer her.”

“And what are your plans for the future?”

“I shall refuse Ezra Reuben’s offer and look out for a small opening, in London, if possible. Ezra is such a good fellow, he will help me, I am sure, and then I can get a letter from the doctor I served under at the Brooklyn Hospital. Of course these are not brilliant prospects, but Margery is young, and I have every confidence that Sir Alec likes me, and will welcome me as his son-in-law.”

“Humph!” remarked Nathaniel thoughtfully, “don’t

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be too confident of Sir Alec, he has a strange way of often doing the very opposite of what you would naturally expect him to do, by a study of his character. In some ways he has often puzzled me. He has an exalted idea of what his children can do, and of the importance and position of the Farradays of Farraday Hall—mind you, I don't say he is personally arrogant, for, strange to say, he has a humble and modest idea of himself; but, in an impersonal manner, he has a terrible stiff notion of what is due to the honour of the Farradays."

"I like him all the better for it," said George stoutly, "but I can't say I anticipate much trouble from him; once my way is clear before me, and I am able to show him that I can support Margery in tolerable comfort, I am sure he will not refuse me."

Nathaniel wisely held his peace. It would not do to quench all the young man's hopes at the first go off.

"You have known Sir Alec many years, Nunc, tell me all about him. You were the first to meet him on his arrival from India, were you not?"

"There is really very little to tell. Sir Alec, I am thankful to say, is very different from the other Farradays I have known at the Hall. He is the first Farraday that has lived a quiet, peaceable, God-fearing life, and the estate is all the better for it. Although old Sir Thomas was a miser, he scraped and hoarded so prodigiously that the estate suffered for want of proper repairs, and a little necessary outlay then would have saved Sir Alec hundreds of pounds now."

"Then Sir Alec is different from Sir Thomas and Sir Reginald?"

"Essentially different from both, in looks and character. I fancy he must take after his mother, she was a Miss

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Lucy Evans, an actress. I never saw her, but I heard she was a fair little thing, so I suppose Sir Alec gets his blue eyes and fair skin from her; the other Farradays all had eagle beaks and piercing black eyes—strange that none of Sir Alec's children should have reverted to the old type. His father, Clement, was a strange man, with most erratic tastes and ideas—in fact all the other Farradays were cranks or misers until good Sir Alec turned up. Old Sir Thomas was a veritable skinflint. He was a bent, wizened-up old man, with keen narrow black eyes, when I can first remember him. He never looked on us as his equals, and I have heard him speak to my father as if he were a bailiff or steward. Sir Reginald was another strange character, wild and extravagant by fits and starts, and then subsiding into a sort of brooding melancholy. After his uncle Clement's death he allowed Sir Alec a grudging £100 a year—think of it, the heir to Farraday Hall and an allowance of £100! I used to talk to him and try to reason with him, but it was no good. 'Enough to keep him from starving,' he would say, and when I wanted to write to Alec—he was then in India, you know—Sir Reginald would not hear of it. 'I shall marry soon and have a pack of children,' he would say, whenever I pointed out to him that his cousin Alec was his next of kin and his heir. He was a pig-headed, obstinate man, without a single friend, although, as I said before, he could be kind and generous by fits and starts. He died through his own stupidity. He got a ducking one day in the hunting field and sat in his wet clothes playing poker until far into the night, riding home afterwards in the same state—he was dead in a week from the effects of it. The Farradays of those days were a weak, sickly, thin-blooded race. After Sir Reginald's death I wrote to Alec. I was glad enough to

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see what a good, honest, manly boy Clement's son had turned out. Lucy Evans must have come of a fine yeoman stock, for I can see none of the Farraday taints in Sir Alec. Well, well, it's over twenty years ago now that I first welcomed him to Farraday Hall."

Nathaniel had become interested in his reminiscences, and a few appreciative words from George sent him rambling on again.

"Yes, Sir Alec, as he was then, was a fine boy, blue-eyed, with brown hair, and six feet in his socks. He came from India in the same ship as Lord Mowbray and Lady Mary, and they were engaged shortly after their arrival. Lord Mowbray, as you know, George, was the Earl of Mowbray, and Lady Mary is Lady Mary in her own right. It was considered a very good match for Sir Alec in those days, but Lady Mary did not have a big dowry, as the earl was badly off, and left as much as he could to his heir—still he did very well and the county families welcomed him with open arms. It was genuinely a love match on both sides, and they made no secret of the fact. Old Lord Mowbray was delighted that his only daughter married the man of her heart, and gave them magnificent wedding presents. I have been their neighbour and friend now for twenty years, and a happier married couple I have never seen. He does not care for politics—but no Farraday ever did—and he has no cranks and extravagances like the rest of them had. He is a splendid landlord and has nursed and improved the estate. Master Tom will be a very rich young man. They are really a boon to the county—no snobbishness, no side. Lady Mary never goes to London, and doesn't care a bit for society. I doubt if Miss Margery will ever get a season and be presented

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unless she puts her foot down, and, as far as I can see, she takes after her parents and prefers a quiet life. I can see that they still look on her as a child, and she was eighteen last birthday. Tom is seventeen; dear me! how time flies! It seems only the other day that you were a little lad playing with them as babies!"

"Did you ever meet Clement Farraday or his wife, or Sir Alec before he went to India?" asked George.

"Yes, I saw Clement often enough before he took to wandering about on the Continent. He was always of a consumptive tendency, and was a thin, badly made man with a sallow complexion, hooked nose and dark eyes. I never saw his wife. When this Sir Alec was a little boy of nine or ten years I saw him once. He came down to Farraday Hall with his father to try to screw some money out of Sir Thomas. He was a thin, delicate little boy, I remember, and wrapped up in an overcoat. Now I will tell you a curious incident connected with that visit. I had a vivid impression that when I saw the little chap he had a thin face and dark hair and eyes. When I saw Sir Alec I was surprised, and said to him: 'I always imagined you were like the rest of the Farradays, with dark eyes and hair,' and he laughed and reminded me that I had only seen him for five minutes in the large hall, and, as it was late in the afternoon on a winter's day, it was very dark, and he added that he had always been considered very like his mother. Of course the mere fact of his remembering the incident proved that I was wrong, still, it just shows you what mistaken impressions one can get. Dear me! How I have been chatting, and it is so late. George, my boy, I think we had better go to our beds, and I must thank you for your confidence in me. I wish you the very best of good luck, and no one in the

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world would I welcome more heartily as your wife than little Miss Margery, only don't get downhearted if your path of love is crossed at first, everything will come right in the end !” and with this optimistic opinion Nathaniel sought his couch.

CHAPTER V

GEORGE rose early, and, after a cold tub, started for a brisk walk towards the Downs. The beauty and cool freshness of the morning intensified the natural exhilaration of his spirits, and nature itself seemed in tune with the joyousness of his mind.

The weight of his past life and its iniquities slipped from his shoulders, and after the resolutions of the past night he felt as if he could face the future with clean hands and heart. The burden of remorse and regret was now a thing of the past, and he devoutly hoped that he would never have to carry it again. His conscience whispered that for every sin and folly committed in this world there is a corresponding price to pay, and that he as yet had not expiated any of the offences of his youth, but he hushed the unwelcome suggestions to sleep, with the consoling thought that his Creator would pardon the past and let him off all the punishment his sins demanded. He realised that his love—his pure passionate love for Margery—had created a new heaven and a new earth, and he felt as if he were the original Adam in a clean new Garden of Eden; his heart sang pæans of thanksgiving, and he was lifted up above the clouds, while his spirit held communion with his Maker. This was the first occasion, since his boyhood, that he had felt bold enough to lay bare the secrets of his heart, and to pour himself out in wordless but perfect and fervent prayer to his God.

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This spiritual communion comforted and soothed him, and seemed to shed a benediction on the human love that had lifted him up to divine heights, while faith assured him that the Arms that were wide enough to embrace all creation would carry his burden for him. The opal tints of early day lent glamour and mystery to the well-known scenery. George walked onward lost in the delight of his imaginations, and with astonishment discovered that he had covered ten miles before he became conscious of his surroundings.

He retraced his steps with all the speed he could, and, taking several short cuts across country, he arrived home in time to find his uncle had just sat down to breakfast, and was gravely chipping the top off his egg.

"I used to hear you say that an early breakfast was an abomination, and that the best hours to sleep were between six and ten," said Nathaniel dryly. "But it seems you have changed your mind and your habits; Mrs. Packer tells me that you left the house before six this morning."

George laughed as he attacked his bacon and steaming coffee. "Oh, I went for a morning stroll," he said lightly. "It was a glorious morning, fresh and clear as crystal. It promises to be a very hot day."

"Did you pay a visit to Farraday Hall?" asked Nathaniel with a chuckle.

"Do you take me for an unmitigated ass?"

"No, not quite. Still, at twenty-seven a young man violently in love is hardly responsible for his actions, and after the symptoms you exhibited last night ——"

"Stop rotting, Nunc, it's sober earnest this time, and no gammon about it. I feel quite a new man this morning and mean to start life again on a different footing. I shall write to Ezra and get him to look out a practice for

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fertile district, found farming a losing game, what with wet seasons, poor crops, and no profits! After many years of patient toil Joseph had justified his choice, and his four acres were in perfect order, and yielded a small return. He had two acres of land covered with very fine vegetables, and a small plot for fruit, while the rest was covered with a wilderness of ordinary hardy garden flowers. By the side of the cottage he had twelve hives of bees, and "Cutty's honey" was famous throughout Sussex.

George found him hoeing his vegetables, his gnarled and withered hands fiercely grasping his hoe, while laborious breaths came from between his lips. He could hardly straighten himself when George approached, and had to clutch at his back with his hand as he tried to bring his bent body to an upright position.

"Hallo, Joe, good-morning," said George in his cheerful voice. "I am sorry to see you like this; what is wrong with you?"

"It's the rheumatis, Master George, the rheumatis has got hold of my old bones. I feel that bad I can scarce do a bit of work; it's all a pain and a toil. I'm afeard I'll have to give up working and get a boy in, but I can't a-bide boys, lazy, idle, good-for-nothing varmint, always eating, Master George, I never knew a boy as wasn't always eating, leastways wanting to eat. And if yer don't give 'em summat to eat they just steals it, aye, carrots and turnips come handy like to 'em, not to mention such things as peas and beetroot."

"My uncle was very sorry to hear you were ill, Joe, and hopes you'll soon be well enough to come and have a look at the garden; he misses you dreadfully when you don't come up to the Lodge, and he is in a fidget lest the boy you sent should spoil all your work."

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Joe had resumed his work as soon as George mentioned Nathaniel's name. "I don't wonder that he's afeard o' what *mischief* that boy will do—I'd as lief turn a lot of fowls into my garden as one boy—still, folks has their feelings, and to tell me that *I* don't understand dahlia bulbs—me as first had cactus dahlias down in these parts ——" words failed the old man.

"We all make mistakes," said George gently. "Uncle is awfully sorry you're ill, and Mrs. Packer is bringing you a small basket this afternoon. As soon as you feel better, come and look up the garden, Joe, and stop that boy doing any further damage."

The old man drew out a red handkerchief and passed it with shaking fingers over his sweat-dewed face.

George stripped off his coat and laid hold of the hoe. "Now, Joe, get a chair and sit down and look on; I'm going to have a turn at this, though I don't suppose I shall be able to do it as well as you do."

"No, I don't suppose as you will. It stands to reason that when a body has been twenty years at a job he knows a deal sight more than a youngster that's never tried his hand at it before. Easy, Master George, easy now, don't-ee take them turnips up by the roots, just loosen the earth all round 'em, ah, that's better." Old Joe stood watching George with keen interest, as he covered the ground.

"Well, I won't say but what you are fairly good at it, for a new hand; still, Master George, don't-ee go for to think as there's nothing to learn in hoeing, there's hoeing and *hoeing*, and everything depends on the hoeing. Ye may put the carrots, or turnips, or beetroot, or whatever 'ee like, down, but what good is it if ye don't hoe and hoe, and give the earth a chance to get the sun and

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rain? And it's rain we'll be having soon, I can tell; whenever my back pains powerful bad it's a sure sign of rain."

Old Joe spoke in the broadest Sussex dialect, which is soft and musical to the ear, but quite impossible to reproduce in print.

"Go and sit down, Joe, and when I have finished I'll come along for a chat," said George, shaking the drops of perspiration out of his eyes.

"Go easy at it, Master George, go easy; ye know, the earth's tender, and don't like rough treatment; I never found it pays. Turn her over, regular, clean; regular, clean; and there you are, you gets the dry muck down below, and the good rich earth on top. Well, I'll away and sit down at the door; but take it easy, Master George, take it easy."

As he went with painful steps towards the door Joe confided to the tortoiseshell cat: "Aye, he's a fine young man, tall and straight, and a kind heart, God bless 'un! not every young gent 'ud stop to hoe old Joe's vegetable patch. Maybe he'll be able to help me, if I tells him all, maybe he'd be willing to take the trouble—and may-be, maybe ——" the old man filled his pipe with careful, loving fingers, and, having lit it, sat drawing deep breaths of contentment.

George's strong arms soon began to feel the strain of the unaccustomed exercise, but he bent his back and his will to his self-inflicted task, and in about two hours returned to the cottage leaving behind him a good stretch of soft brown earth, "regular clean," as old Joe expressed it. Through all his aching muscles he had the glorious consciousness of work conquered, that comes to every tiller of the ground in his wrestle with mother earth.

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"I've enjoyed that, Joe," he said, "its glorious exercise, and I am very proud of my two hours' work."

"If ye'll just step inside, there's a bowl of water and a duster. Ye'll feel mucky and sweaty after the hoeing."

George rinsed his face, and felt as fresh as paint once more. As he came outside Joe put a large glass of milk and a crust of bread into his hand.

"Now sit 'ee down and eat that, and sup the milk. I'll warrant it'll have a rare fine taste after the way ye've toiled."

Joe spoke the truth; the crust of dry bread and the glass of milk were the sweetest food that George had tasted since his hungry school-boy days.

"Well Joe, Uncle is sending you a small basket this afternoon, just a few delicacies from Mrs. Packer, and I will send you a bottle of St. Jacob's Oil to rub on your back. Really, this milk is delicious, and I've enjoyed it immensely."

"Now, don't haste away, Master George, 't isn't every day I get some one to speak to—not that I'm complaining, it's my own choice I'm here, still it does get lonesome, whiles. Though I will say I'd rather have the quiet heath all around me than the clap, clap, clatter of foolish tongues."

George handed his tobacco pouch to the old man and they both sat in the shade at the door of the cottage, with the dreamy heat of noontide resting over the heath and the drowsy humming of the bees in the air. Both drew long quiet pulls at their pipes and gazed over the lonely moor, now melting into the odorous languor of noonday.

"Aye, Master George, it's wonnerful what a hold this y'ere place has got over me. Many and many's the time I've swore as it wasn't worth the moil and toil, but still

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I'm here, and moiling and toiling just the same. You see," he said, pointing with the stem of his clay pipe towards the heath, "well, it just talks to me, and I—I sit and look at it and think—and think—and I just talk to it back."

George did not answer, he had an intuition that the old man wanted to confide in him, and thought it better to let him lead up to the subject in his own way.

"For nigh on twenty years I've sat here and I've not complained. I don't say as I'm a good chapel-going, church-going man, but I've waited on the Lord all these years an' He won't fail me now. Seems to me as if 'twas the time to speak. Something has been working in me since ever you returned from furrin parts, and something seemed to say to me, wonnerful clear an' strong, 'Joe, just you tell everything to Master George, he'll help you in your trouble'. Aye, Master George, if only folks 'ud open their hearts to the Lord, they'd hear Him talk to 'em, as plain as I am talking now. I often feel," and the old man's voice grew hushed and solemn, "when all's quiet and still, as if the Lord came an' walked here in this garden, and just talked to me; sometimes it seems so real to me as I've only got to open my eyes and see Him a-standing there beside me. Aye, aye, Master George, the Lord can make a bitter cup taste sweet an' it's not so lonesome when you think He's here, a-long-side o' ye."

"You have a real and vivid faith, Joe; and, after all, it's not a bad life, away here in the solitude of the heath, with your flowers and your bees; you have no one to disturb and worry you. Have you any relations, Joe; any one belonging to you?" asked George between the puffs of his pipe.

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"No. Leastways I have—and yet I ain't," and again a short silence fell on the two men.

"Your uncle's a good man," said Joe at last, and it struck George that he spoke as if he had at last made up his mind to confide in him, "a rare, kind-hearted man is Mist'r Targett, not but what he isn't extraordinary vexatious over his flowers, an' he knowing nothing either, a talking to them that does; well, as I was saying, he's a good-hearted man, an' praps he doesn't mean all he says. He often sits here with me, just as you are doing now, Master George, an' we talk—leastways, I talks, and he listens. Sometimes he talks too, mostly 'bout you, for he's very proud o' you, his heart's fair set on you." Another short silence, and then the old man turned with his face quivering towards George. "I heard, Master George, that ye was likely to go to Lunnon; maybe—maybe—ye might do something to ease an old man's mind—maybe, some day in Lunnon—it can't be such a mighty big place as all that—maybe ye might come across't her—my Nancy, my girl? I've known ye since ye were a little lad in short pants—oh, Master George, if ye could only find her—if ye could only find her," he covered his twitching face with his trembling hands.

George knew that silence was more sympathetic than speech, so he sat still and waited, while Joe furtively wiped away the moisture from his eyes.

"Ye've never seen her, Master George; it's many years now, more'n twenty-one years, since she went away, but I cannot forget her, and I'm fair weary for a sight of her face. She was such a frolicksome merry lassie, for ever playing jinks with her old father, for ever a-laughing an' romping an' chatting, but there was never a pinch of vice

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in the lass—she was as good—as innercent —— ” here the old man’s voice quivered and broke.

“What can I do for you, Joe?” asked George gently. “How can I find her for you? Why have you not told us anything all these years?”

The old man looked up, with the tears undried on his rugged face. His mind was so engrossed with past memories that he scarcely noticed George’s questions.

“She was led away—drove away—but not by me. We was living in Forest Row, then—more’n twenty years ago—she was a bit of a girl, not sixteen, Master George, not sixteen, just a child, a playful, merry child, and never a care or sorrow, for I loved her dearly. What did she know of sin—or vice? Oh—when I think of it,” —long-pent sorrow shook the old man, and he bowed his grey head on his hands. After a few minutes he wiped his face, and tried to pull himself together.

“Ye’ll forgive me, Master George, making such an old fool of myself? Still it’s a natural feeling, an’ no shame to me. God took my girl’s mother when she was born, and the lass was everything I loved in the world. Oh, Master George, if ye could have seen my girl as she was then, so bonny, so winsome —— ” and again the old man choked with feeling.

“Have you any photo, any picture of her?” asked George.

“Aye, such as it is, but it don’t do her justice. It was took by a travelling man for sixpence the year she went away. I little thought then that it was all I should have to remind me o’ my Nancy for twenty years—for twenty years,” repeated the old man slowly, as he hobbled indoors and brought out an old-fashioned daguerreotype. It repre-

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sented a young, comely girl, with a merry mouth, laughing eyes, and a mass of dark hair."

"And she is in London?" asked George.

"She went away with a man from Lunnon, and I never heard tell of her agen. I warned her, and warned her. I knew the little blackguard didn't mean any good to my girl, but what's the use of words when love is pleading, and my poor Nancy loved him."

"What was the name of the man—and what was he like?"

"He was a dapper little man, fair like, with sandy hair and green eyes. He always put me in mind of a ferret or weasel, or such like. He called himself Mist'r James, Mist'r Edward James, and my girl called him Teddie."

"I will do my best for you, Joe, and will try to find your Nancy for you. The very next time I go up to London I will put the matter into capable hands, and we'll see what can be done. You must not build any hopes on it, Joe, for it is almost impossible that we shall ever get any news of her; still, I will do all I can, you may rest assured of that."

"And there's another thing, Master George, if ye would be so kind; seeing as no one in Dane Hill knows about Nancy, don't tell the folk round about—I don't want their silly talk—an' no one'll ever blame Nancy in my hearing."

George stood up. "Well, I must be going Joe, but I'll look in again and see you. Your confidence is quite safe with me, not a soul in Dane Hill shall hear a word of what you have told me. Cheer up, things may end happily, you know. Take care of that rheumatism of yours, Uncle is feeling very worried because you can't get up to look after the garden."

A whimsical smile twisted Joe's lips as he answered:

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'Aye, tell Mist'r Targett I'm better, and that he need not fear for his flowers, I'll be round looking after things tomorrow, if all's well. And—and—Master George," said Joe, laying his hand tenderly on the young man's arm, "thank you kindly—thank you for all you've done for a poor lonesome old man. And, Master George, maybe, maybe—if ye do find her, as I'm certain you will—maybe she has come down—down to sin and misfortune through that devil—it may be ye may find her in the gutter—or the streets, Master George—but tell her I've a nice little home here, and there's plenty to live on. Tell her I've never blamed her, and that she'll never hear a word of anything but love from me. Tell her that her old father is just weary to see her agen, and a-longing for her—even if she's ever so poor and sinful—for she's my girl, after all, and if she'd been bad, it's only what *he* made her. And tell her I can't die till I see her agen. I know ye'll find her, Master George,—I'll know ye'll find her, and bring her back to her home."

CHAPTER VI

IT was during the first week in August that Nathaniel received a letter from the Rev. Charles Woodburn informing him that, after making diligent inquiries, he had found a certain Dr. Durward Richardson who was looking for a junior partner in a steady, lucrative practice in Kensington; and if Nathaniel was still of a mind to pay £3,000 or £4,000 (he did not remember the exact figure), he thought George might be a likely candidate for the post. Nathaniel lost no time in replying, but insisted again on his former condition, that George should not hear of the large premium he was paying for him. Consequently, it was with considerable surprise that the young man read a letter from Dr. Richardson, requesting him to forward his medical qualifications and certificates, and to call on him at Carlyle House, Kensington Park Road, during the course of the week, in order to discuss the subject of a partnership between himself and George Targett, subject to the approval of both parties.

"Now mind you satisfy yourself that it is a good paying concern you're taking up, George, my boy, and don't be rushed into any agreement until you have consulted me on the subject. I'm a lawyer, and you insist on my drawing up your deed of partnership, so that I can ascertain for myself whether the practice is really worth your medical qualifications and abilities, my dear boy."

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"Well, really, I've never had such a piece of luck in my life. Fancy an offer of this nature from a total stranger. He says that the Rev. Charles Woodburn is his reference, it is really very decent of the old man to have spoken about me. I have only seen him once or twice in my life, but I expect he did it for your sake, Nunc, as you and James Woodburn used to be such thick pals. I'll send off my papers to-day, and go up to town the day after to-morrow if it's all the same to you. I only hope I shall satisfy this Dr. Richardson, and that he won't think me too young for the post. But what a piece of luck; great Scott! what a bit of luck; bless the reverend old Charles!"

George saw Joseph Cutter out in the garden, and found an opportunity of telling him in private that he was going up to London shortly, and would fulfil his promise and set the necessary machinery in motion in order to find his long-lost Nancy.

"Bless ye, Master George, bless ye, and may the Lord prosper ye in all your doings," was the old man's benison on his journey.

Even though he only expected to be away for a short time, a week at latest, George thought he had better ride over and say good-bye to his friends at the Hall.

"This is bad luck, George, that you are running away just as the shooting commences," said Sir Alec in his genial, hearty manner, "we hope to get a little grouse shooting after the 12th and I was counting on you. I have a few guns for the 1st of September, so, if you cannot manage it at present, do try and run down by then, and help us to slaughter the partridges."

"I don't expect to be away for long, but my plans are uncertain at present. You are very kind, Sir Alec, and you may be sure I shall return as soon as I can. I have

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never forgotten the excellent sport you gave me when I was a youngster, and I am longing to have a bang at the birds again."

"Yes, you used to be quite a dab at it," remarked Tom. "I used to envy you no end in those days. I hope you haven't forgotten how to shoot straight since you've been to America."

"I hope not," laughed George, as he said his farewells. Margery was among the others when he bade them good-bye, but he longed to get a chance of telling her in private the reason of his sudden visit to London, and fate was kind to him; he met her later on that same afternoon as she was returning from visiting a sick person in the village.

"My lucky star is in the ascendant," said George as he joined her, his eyes sparkling and his face flushing at the unexpected sight of his little lady-love. "I was longing and wishing to see you for even a minute—alone—before I went away—and here you are—and ——" his eyes eagerly sought her face. She had looked pale and listless he thought before he joined her, but now the soft colour was coming and going in her cheeks.

"I am going to London on business, Marnie, and if it comes off—if everything turns out well—it will mean a good thing for me, and then I shall be in a position to—to tell you something."

They walked in silence along the road until they came to the narrow pathway that led through the copse as a short cut to the Hall. He followed close behind her, and when she reached the stile at the corner of the park he put his arm gently round her waist and turned her, until she stood facing him.

"You will not forget me, Marnie? I may be away for longer than a week. You will not forget me?"

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Her downcast lids veiled the expression of her eyes, but George could see that they were bright with the glitter of unshed tears.

"Don't forget me, Margery, I shall never forget you, my little girl. Marnie, just say once, 'George, I'll not forget you, God speed you,' and I shall go with a much lighter heart, as it is, Marnie, I dread leaving you even for a week."

"God speed you, I'll not forget you, George," she whispered softly, her heart beating rapidly with emotion.

He raised her hand and kissed it passionately.

"God bless you, darling, good-bye." He turned away abruptly and walked rapidly down the narrow footpath, and Margery stood at the stile looking after him, until his footsteps grew fainter and fainter, and then ceased in the distance.

George's visit to London lasted much longer than he expected. It was quite a month before Nathaniel received the tidings that matters had been satisfactorily settled, and that his nephew was returning for a few weeks to Dane Hill before taking up his practice in London. Nathaniel's private business transactions were also completed with Dr. Durward Richardson, and he was favourably impressed with the man who was to be his nephew's partner. As far as he could judge from his letters, he struck Nathaniel as being a singularly straightforward and plain-spoken man.

George returned to Dane Hill Lodge late one Thursday afternoon during the second week of September, bringing with him the rough draft of the deed of partnership for Nathaniel to look over. The old man soon satisfied

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himself that his nephew had obtained the very best terms possible. Dr. Richardson agreed to give him, in return for his services, £500 a year for five years, and at the end of that period an equal share of the income arising from the practice. Nathaniel and Grimson went over the draft very carefully, and then informed George that they considered everything in order, and the terms quite satisfactory.

"What is this Dr. Richardson like?" asked Nathaniel.

"A tall, thin man, with pince-nez; keen sharp grey eyes, and stooping shoulders. He struck me as being a most ambitious man. He is very quick and clever in his diagnosis of a case, and very earnest and persevering in working it out. He told me that he wants to give up this general practice and start as a specialist—he did not say in what particular subject—he says that nowadays specialists are the only men who rise to the top of the medical profession. He told me that the Kensington practice is worth £3,000 a year, and that some specialists earn more than that in a month. There is no doubt that Dr. Richardson is keen on making a name and a fortune, and when you come to think of it, it is a most extraordinary thing that a man of his stamp, so pushing and eager to amass wealth and fame, should have taken a poor, unknown man as his partner. I said as much to him."

"Yes? And what did he say?" asked Nathaniel.

"He said that I could not consider myself as a partner until five years were up, and that in the meanwhile I was an assistant, and would have to take the lion's share of the work off his shoulders. He also very kindly remarked that he thought I should suit him, and that, as far as he was concerned, it was an excellent business arrangement.

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He hinted that I could buy the practice outright, if I cared to, after some years. I must try and save for that purpose."

"Is he a married man?"

"Yes, but I only saw his wife once or twice. She is a sweet-looking woman, some years older than he is, I should say; very stout and very delicate. Dr. Richardson told me that she is a chronic invalid; they have to go abroad every year for her health, and the doctor is so tired of *locum tenens* that he decided to get a partner. He thinks it will pay him much better, and so do I. He has taken a villa for his wife at Nice for the winter, and wants me to come and start practising as soon as possible, so that he can get away. He wants to take her there, come back for a month or two, and then go back again to her. They are devoted to each other, and keen as he is about getting on, I think it is only on his wife's account, and for her sake. I am to go back on Monday, if possible, with this draft, and if you approve of it, I will sign it, and then return for a week or so before joining Richardson for good. I think that the 1st of October will be a good date."

"Have the Richardsons any children?" again asked Nathaniel.

"No, not that I ever heard of. Did I tell you he had arranged that I was to live with them, paying my own expenses? I am to have a charming suite of rooms on the ground floor, and Richardson told me that I ought to get married as soon as I could. I told him that I would try to oblige him, but that the matter did not lie in my hands entirely."

Nathaniel laughed. "I don't want to croak, George, but don't count too surely on Sir Alec; £500 a year won't sound much to him."

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George did not tell Nathaniel that he had spent some days in hunting for Nancy Cutter personally, and only when he realised how difficult the search was, had he placed the matter in the hands of the smartest detective firm in London; in fact, George had never mentioned what old Joe had confided in him, and Nathaniel had no idea that his nephew had promised to do his best to find Nancy. Nathaniel knew all there was to know about her, but quite thought that Joe had given up all hope of seeing his lost child again. There was another small occurrence that George did not say anything about, although he had no ulterior object in withholding the information. He had stated during a conversation with Richardson that he lived with Ezra Reubens in America, and the doctor had eagerly asked him if he could bring them together, as he had been most anxious to meet Mr. Reubens for some years past; he had read Ezra's writings in various medical papers and had the keenest desire to meet him. George told him that he expected the Reubens to come to London shortly, and that he would certainly introduce him to them, with the greatest pleasure.

While they were at dinner Nathaniel gave George all the news of the Hall.

"They have got Jim Dudsworth staying with them, I believe, for the past week, and I hear that he is a crack shot and has been making record bags; Sir Alec is quite taken with him. You will have to make the most of your time, George my boy; he is a formidable rival, if he cares to enter the lists against you. The Honourable Jim Dudsworth has very heavy material advantages; his father is Lord Dudsworth and he is the only son; Dudsworth is a fine estate, and only one out of six others."

"Who else have they had for the shooting?"

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"Colonel Chatterton and Gordon Graham have joined them every day, I believe; but they are not staying at the Hall."

"It seems rather surprising to me that they have invited Jim to stay at the Hall, as I always heard that he was a most undesirable youngster; a wild, vicious sort of chap."

"He has had a bad record so far. I have heard lurid tales of his vices and debauches, but I daresay they are highly coloured and overdrawn. He has never been down in our part of the country before, and only came to Dudsworth Place when they wired to him that his father was dying. The old man has recovered, it seems, and Jim is staying on with the Farradays. I hope he won't take it into his head to fall in love with Margery."

George became suddenly thoughtful. The tidings that this rich and desirable young man had daily and hourly intercourse with Margery upset him. He could not imagine any man in her proximity who would not fall in love with her, and then what chance would he have against Jim, with his title, estates and wealth? The rosy view he had taken all along of the ultimate success of his wooing became clouded and overcast, and George felt an unreasoning antagonism to young Dudsworth the very first time he saw his pale, spotty face, small wiry frame, and thick-lipped dissolute mouth.

Jim Dudsworth, or James Montague Fitzwarren Gillespie Dudsworth, to give him his full title, was the only issue of Baron Dudsworth of Dudsworth, Sussex, aged twenty-five, as any one who read Burke could discover. In spite of his noble lineage, he gave strangers the impression that he was a jockey, or perhaps an upper groom in some swell livery stables; and pervading his personality was an ad-

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mixture of swagger, cunning, and unlimited and unbounded conceit. His conversation was limited to racing and stable matters, with spicy bits of scandal thrown in ; his mental outlook was, in a way, diseased. He judged all men by himself, and that meant that they were all blackguards, and most women, he openly boasted, had their price. That such a thing as absolute goodness, for its own sake, existed he did not believe.

"He, Jim Dudsworth, knew a thing or two, and what *he* did not know was not worth knowing," was his own verdict on himself.

George hated him at first sight, and Jim returned the feeling with interest. He looked insignificant and ugly beside George, with his tall figure and handsome face. Jim had always boasted of being able to ride at seven stone, but as he compared himself with George he suddenly wished he had allowed his weight to go up a bit.

Very shortly after the young men had been introduced Sir Alec took them to the drawing-room, where Jim very quickly spotted that George was spoony on Margery. Up to this time he had taken very little notice of the girl ; she was not his style. He liked big flashy girls, with plenty of dash and a lot to say for themselves ; this merry, laughing little girl, with her innocent fun and simple ideas, did not attract him at all, but from the moment that he saw that ass Targett, soft on Margery he made up his mind to mash her himself so as to cut him out.

George had bought a parcel of sweets and toys for the two babies, and some gifts for Cicely and Alec, which he had sent up to the schoolroom by Vickers as soon as he arrived.

"You are really too kind, George," said Lady Mary, as

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soon as she saw him. "I was up in the nursery when your parcels arrived. Tots is asleep, but she will go off her head in the morning when she sees what you have brought her. Cicely and Alec are in the schoolroom, would you care to run up for a few minutes? Cicely has sent a message that they want to see 'Porgee'."

"I shall be delighted," answered George politely, but, with inward grief at the idea of leaving Margery's side even for half an hour.

"Marnie dear, take George up to the schoolroom, Cicely and Alec have sent a message saying they want to see him," said Lady Mary, who had always a soft corner for George.

"Cheeky little beggars! don't you go, Targett; I'm blowed if I'd be at the beck and call of a couple of kids," remarked Tom.

"Oh, I don't mind really," said George, to whom the complexion of affairs had altered considerably since he knew he would not be parted from his lady-love.

A scowl came over Jim's expressive features as the two left the room together, Margery with demurely down-cast eyes and George looking delighted with himself. "I suppose he'll kiss her on the stairs,—he'd be a d——d fool if he didn't," thought the young man. He was wrong; but George was no fool and did not kiss her on the stairs. Margery walked swiftly in front of him and led the way,—a dainty fairy-like little white-clad figure—and while they were on the broad staircase George sedately followed her. As she turned down the dimly lighted corridor leading to the schoolroom he came beside her and took her hand.

"Margery, little girl, I have come back," he said, lifting her fingers to his lips.

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Being a self-evident fact it was a stupid remark to make, but the proximity of his lady-love drove all coherent thoughts out of his head, every faculty being merged into the delight of sheer sensation. A faint cling of the little fingers in his—the first response the girl had given to his passion—sent thrills of joy trembling through him; quivering and silent under the spell of the feelings that held them they stood together almost breathless in the semi-darkness. He longed to take her in his arms, to kiss her, and show her what love was; a strong almost overwhelming wave of passion swept over him, nearly carrying him off his feet; it was all he could do to resist the inclination to yield to some more decided demonstration of his feelings, and the only thing that held him back was the fear of frightening and offending the girl who had just shown him unconsciously that love had dawned in her heart. Once again he kissed her hand, holding the soft little palm against his burning lips, and again he felt the cling and thrill of her fingers in his. During the silence of those few minutes the very air seemed tense with suppressed emotion, and both felt that they were living one of the most exquisite moments of their lives. He saw the white outline of her delicate face and small figure, she saw him mistily, through a maze of new and delightful sensations, and through the darkness his eyes, eager and brilliant, sought hers.

The schoolroom door opened, the spell was broken, and the lovers started apart.

"It'll soon be bed-time," grumbled Cicely, standing at the door, "and Porgee hasn't turned up yet. I wish he'd come."

"Here he is," cried George gaily, going forward. With

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a shriek of delight Cicily and Alec rushed forward to greet him.

Margery ran off to her own room, where she stood for a moment with her hand on her bosom, as if to still its agitated beating; then, taking a hasty look at herself in her mirror, she returned to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE acquitted himself very well during the following days' shooting. Sir Alec was loud in his praise, and his old friends among the keepers made no secret of their preference. He was given the most advantageous spots and made a magnificent bag. Little Jim Dudsworth, who had hitherto lived for sport, and sport only, was wounded in his tenderest feelings. He instinctively disliked all men whom he termed brainy chaps, and sneered at intellect, unless it were successful enough to have amassed a fortune. He was, as he expressed it, cock-sure of himself, as a first-class rider and a crack shot. That this brainy Johnny, a bumptious, pretentious, penniless nobody, should beat him on his own ground was a very bitter pill, and Jim, prospective Baron of Dudsworth, was not used to swallowing bitter pills. With a vehemence that surprised himself he made a resolution to pay Targett out, and resolved he would get the better of him, and make him smart somehow. At present, however, Fortune smiled on George and everything went swimmingly for him; Jim could only look on, scowling, and muttering dark threats in his heart, but no one even suspected the state of his feelings, and George took absolutely no notice of him. In fact, to add to his injuries, he was frequently expected to swell the chorus of praise that followed George.

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Every dog has his day, as the saying goes, and this was George's day with a vengeance. Margery was proud that he could shoot straight and that the older sportsmen praised him; she thought that he looked very handsome in his Norfolk coat and knickers, and admired in secret the shape of his legs quite as much as the size of his bag. Most of these facts her innocent eyes revealed to him, and a good deal more that she did not dream of. George trod on air, so to speak, and lived for that short week in a maze of happiness. He did not forget Joe Cutter, and when he saw the old man pottering round Nathaniel's greenhouse he told him what steps he had taken in London to try and find Nancy.

"I can give you very little hope, remember, Joe; it will be, at best, a question of time and patience," and he might have added, of money, for it had already cost him a good bit, and was likely to cost him a great deal more, if the search went on indefinitely. However, he kept that to himself, and not even Nathaniel suspected where a slice of George's American savings had gone. He returned to town on Monday evening, promising, all being well, to join Sir Alec's shooting-party again on the following Friday. During his absence Jim Dudsworth made up his mind to mash Margery. He was not in any sense in love with the girl then, but a feeling that this was the best means in his power to get even with George spurred him on, and he found, to his surprise, that the more he saw of the girl the better he liked her. Margery was glad enough to have him to talk to during George's absence. Her heart was so full of her absent lover that she never for a moment suspected that Jim was trying to make love to her. She was glad of his company, and treated him in a friendly, sisterly manner, that ought to have shown him

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the real state of her feelings. As it was, Jim, who was used to a very different class of girl, mistook her friendliness and open kindness of manner, and flattered his conceited little soul that he had made a fresh conquest, and that she had only been "playing the fool with that boulder Targett".

"She's like all the rest of 'em," he cogitated, "she knows a good thing when she sees it. I've only got to hold up my little finger and she'll jump at the chance of being Lady Dudsworth. I won't be in any hurry; I don't believe in tying myself down to a nursery chit; but I'll just show that ass that he's got no earthly chance with the girl. That'll spoil his pudding for him," and Jim, sucking at his cigar, chuckled at the thought of what he would make George suffer.

The consequence was, that when George returned he was amazed to find Jim putting on proprietary airs with Margery, and insinuating that she had given him encouragement for such attentions. The girl herself could not understand what was in the air. Jim would not leave her side when George was present, and every now and again made little speeches to her that caused her to flush with annoyance, and wonder why he had changed so suddenly and become so distasteful to her. George was in a white heat of rage, and so blinded by jealousy that he refused to see the pathetic look in Margery's eyes as he treated her with distant coldness. As soon as Margery saw that George took no notice of her silent appeal, pride came to her aid, and she threw herself more and more into Jim's society and ignored her lover. She repaid his anger and coldness by a contemptuous indifference that did great credit to her hurt pride and histrionic abilities. Both their hearts were sore and angry, and yet both longed to

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find a way out of the trouble that had fallen on them. Jim, who considered that he had pulled the wires to some purpose, nearly killed himself with suppressed merriment over the scowl on George's face.

Sir Alec for the first time began to observe that the two young men were paying attentions to Margery, and he commenced to think very seriously on the question of his eldest child's marriage. That Jim Dudsworth should love Marnie was at first a slight shock; he had for many years regarded him as a wild and profligate youngster, and what he usually called a bad lot. Now, however, things assumed another aspect; he found himself making excuses for Jim, and looking on him with a very tolerant eye, while he blamed himself bitterly for having encouraged George so much.

"I must put a stop to all that nonsense at once," he thought, and hugged to his soul the delightful hope that his little Marnie would one day be Lady Dudsworth.

"I must get young Targett out of her way; lucky thing he's going off to London. I never dreamt of this when I asked Jim down for the shooting! Marnie seems to like him, and he is plainly in love with her. My little girl! how proud I shall be when I see her Lady Dudsworth! Of course Jim has been a bit wild in his day, but he's behaved decently here, and I daresay all the reports I heard were exaggerated; he'll be sure to sober down once he's married. If Marnie only likes him——" this was where his thoughts became disquieting. He thought he knew his daughter very well, and, in spite of all her friendliness with Jim, felt that she cared far more for George. "He will soon be out of the way," he decided again. "Marnie is a child yet, and her feelings are not deep; she'll soon get over it and take up with Jim."

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The shooting had gone off fairly well. George was so unsettled that his aim was not so good as usual, and Jim made several triumphant, sneering remarks about men whose shooting was only straight once in a way—"Flash in the pan business, don't ye know," he remarked to Sir Alec.

By Sunday matters had reached a climax. Margery said she had a headache and remained in bed late. George had walked up from the Lodge, intending to go to church, but when he saw all the party from the Hall going in, and observed that Margery was not among them, he turned away, leaving Nathaniel to go in alone, and walked quickly up to the Hall.

Margery had risen late, her head really aching very badly. She felt crushed and hopeless, and being so young was in despair; nothing, she thought, would ever come right again. This was the first sorrow that had touched her young life, the misunderstanding with George was tragic to her, and life itself was not worth living. She wandered listlessly into the garden.

"I suppose he never really cared for me," she thought bitterly. "I expect he was only amusing himself; he must have flirted with heaps of other girls to be so good at it."

She was so overcome by the sadness of this thought, and the want of her usual breakfast, that she sat down on one of the garden seats and cried bitterly.

When George reached the Hall he was informed that Margery had gone out into the garden, and following her he saw her sit down and saw her golden head bent over the back of a bench, and on going towards her heard her sobs.

"Margery darling, what has happened?" he asked in

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alarm, seizing the hand that was lying idle in her lap. She tried to draw it away and wipe her eyes at the same time.

"Marnie, what have I done? Why are you so cruel to me?" he pleaded.

Margery shook her head; the injustice of his question took her breath away; she considered that she had suffered from his cruelty, and not he from any treatment of hers.

"Come with me, Margery," he said in a masterful manner; "we can't sit and talk in the middle of the garden. We must settle this matter. There's the old summer-house, no one will interrupt us there," and he led her unresisting to the small summer-house at the end of the rose garden. They sat down on the narrow wooden bench, and taking out his handkerchief he dried her eyes.

"Now, tell me why you were crying, darling?" he asked, putting his arm round her slim waist. She felt the throbbing of his heart against her shoulder, and a tingling thrill ran through her at the touch of his hand. "Tell me, Marnie, why are you so cruel to me?" he asked, bending over her. There was no possible answer to this question and once again she shook her head.

"Marnie, little love, I told you I had something to tell you, and I hope you can guess what it is. I love you, darling, I love you;" she could feel his arms quiver as they held her closely against him.

She yielded to his embrace with a soft sigh of satisfaction; she felt at last that complete and absolute sense of perfect happiness that comes to every woman when the one man in the world holds her to his heart.

"You must tell me, Marnie, with your own lips, do you love me?" he pleaded.

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She lifted her shy eyes, wide and dewy with emotion, to his face, and he felt the answering thrill of passion that ran through her as she replied:—

“I have always loved you, George”.

Then he kissed her. There is no need to tell the rapture and ecstasy of that first kiss. If you have never felt it, reader, well, you may do in time; and if you have experienced it, you know exactly the delirium and delight of it, and if you, unhappily, are never destined to thrill with the keenest rapture our mortal senses can know, then no mere words can ever paint the sensation to you. Having kissed her once, George kissed Margery again and again, her forehead, her eyes, her hair, her neck. She yielded her soft, clinging little body into his arms and made no protest.)

“Now, kiss me,” he said, and putting both arms round his neck—she had to stand on tiptoe to do it—she obeyed him.

The lovers forgot all sense of time and place until the gay voices of the children returning from church fell on their ears.

“Why, George, the whole morning has gone, and I thought we had only been out here a few minutes,” Margery said in alarm, trying in a half-hearted way to draw herself out of his arms.

“Sit down, sweetheart,” he said, and drew her on his knees. “Before I go we must talk seriously.”

“Yes, George,” she answered meekly, putting her arm round his neck and laying her head on his shoulder.

“Marnie, little love, I have been a wicked man in many ways during my past life, and I am not fit to kiss you and to hold you like this; say you forgive all the past, even though you don’t know or understand half of what I am saying.”

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"Of course, George, every one is naughty sometimes; I don't like goody-goody people, they are usually so uncomfortable to get on with. Of course I forgive you," a kiss, soft as a snowflake fell on his cheek.

"Whatever the past has been, I am yours now, Marnie, and I will live so as to be worthy of you, God helping me. I loved you when I was a boy; now I am a man—nearly thirty—and I love you with all the strength of my manhood. You are the only possible wife in the world for me; we were made for each other, Marnie; two odd half pieces quite incomplete until we are joined together to form a perfect whole. Do you feel that way too, Marnie; that there is no other man in the world who could ever be the real satisfactory mate of your life but me? What about Jim Dudsworth?"

Margery laughed, a soft happy laugh. "Jim! Oh, he is all right to talk to—but to kiss—and to marry," she gave a slight shudder.

"And will you marry me, Marnie? Your first sweetheart?"

"Yes," she answered happily, laying her velvety cheek close to his, "my first and my only sweetheart."

This was so eminently satisfactory and delightful that George had to pause and kiss the little mouth that said it.

"But do you realise what it all means, Marnie? I shall only be a struggling wretch of a doctor for many years. I have precious little to offer you, my darling, and life in London on £500 a year is nothing in comparison with all you have been accustomed to here, and remember, little love, that your father may never give his consent." Margery smiled in contentment.

"Oh yes, he will. Daddy has always given me every-

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thing I wanted all my life. I don't mind if we're poor, George, what fun it will be. And how nice it will be keeping house for you." The prospect was enchanting, and George had to kiss her again.

"But, darling, we must face this question: Suppose your father should refuse his consent—what then?"

Margery sat silent for a few minutes, wrinkling her brows in thought.

"But why should he not consent?" she asked.

"Because I am poor, and really, Marnie, I am no match for you. If I were your father I don't think I would accept such a poor suitor for my lovely daughter. Now, darling, if your father is sensible and says *no*—what then?"

"I can't marry you against his wishes," said Margery slowly, "and, of course, I can't marry any one else."

"That's all right, Marnie darling; that's all I want. Swear to me," and he caught her two little hands against his breast, "swear that you will always be true to me, whatever happens, and that you will never marry any other man but me."

She trembled a little at his vehemence.

"I swear, George, I will be true to you always, and of course I won't marry any one else."

A shadow of coming sorrow hung over George as he folded her closely in his arms again, and his heart ached at the thought that perhaps they might be parted. The lunch bell startled them back to the realities of life.

"I will walk over and ask Sir Alec after lunch. I had better not go in with you now, Marnie, or he would know at a glance what had happened, and he might harden his heart." He tore himself away from her, and she walked with lingering steps towards the house.

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When George asked Sir Alec for a private interview that afternoon the latter more than suspected the cause of his errand, and only hoped devoutly that the young man had not already spoken to Margery.

George went straight to the point, mentioned that he was now a partner of Durward Richardson's, that his income for five years would be £500 a year, after that period he stood the chance of getting the whole practice, worth quite ten times that amount. George spoke as well as he could, and put himself and his offer in the best possible light. Sir Alec was seated in his favourite chair in the library, and made no remark as George poured out his hopes and feelings. He sat for a few minutes, his head sunk on his breast, his hands loosely clasping the arms of his chair; he looked as if lost in a reverie, and George could almost have fancied that a look of deep sorrow had gathered in his eyes. When he spoke he rang the knell of all George's hopes.

"So you want to marry my Margery? Well, George, I must tell you that until three days ago I had no notion of this state of affairs, and it has come as a great shock to me. I find it hard to realise that my little girl has become a woman. You tell me that you love her, and that she loves you. This is childish, only a renewal of your boy and girl friendship, and Margery is much too young to know the meaning of the word love. I have no doubt you are quite sincere, but it is only three months since you returned from America, and you have not had time to allow your feelings to become serious. Margery is a mere child, and does not know her own mind. You must give up all idea of marrying my daughter, George; it is impossible."

"Sir Alec!" said George in dismay, "you have only

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said that Margery is too young; have you any other objection to me?" He looked very handsome as he stood in front of the older man, his face white and eager, his eyes dark with feeling.

"Yes, George; I don't want to hurt your feelings—your uncle is my old friend, and I have known you all your life—but—I have other matters to consider, and I must speak openly to you. You have told me of your prospects and your ambitions; frankly, I don't think much of them. I respect the admiration and affection you have for my child, but they are not sufficient. You will earn £500 a year as a doctor in London, on which you hope to keep yourself and your wife—my daughter can never fill that position. Do you know what it would mean to her, accustomed from her birth to every luxury and comfort, to be shut away in a second-rate locality, pinching and scraping on all sides, and looked down upon by all the members of my wife's family?"

"I am quite aware," answered George bitterly, "that I am in no respect a worthy match for her; still, Sir Alec, it would not be poverty, and I have put matters as plainly as possible before you. We are of a fairly good family, and have never had any cause to be ashamed of our name."

Was it fancy, or did a dark shadow flit across Sir Alec's face?

"I own that in your eyes, Sir Alec, £500 a year is very little, but let us wait for five years; let us be engaged openly, and let me marry Margery at the end of that period. Do consent to this, Sir Alec; we love each other very dearly." George's proud, eager voice had grown very humble towards the close of his speech, and Sir Alec saw that the young man was terribly in earnest.

"Certainly not! I cannot allow any such thing." Sir

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Alec seemed to be losing patience. "You quite forget yourself in urging this preposterous notion. You want my daughter to wait five years for *you*! I never heard such nonsense in my life. Pray understand me quite clearly, I will never allow you to marry my child, and you must give up all idea of ever doing so. You acknowledge that it will be five years before you can afford to keep a wife, and you expect Margery, with her position and beauty, to wait that period for you—a mere nobody! I could not dream of allowing my daughter to waste her youth and sweetness waiting for a problematical future. My last word is said, Mr. Targett, and for your uncle's sake I am sorry; but there can never be any hope for you. I should recommend you to choose a young lady more adapted to your modest means," added Sir Alec, with most unnecessary bitterness. George thought the cutting remark might have been spared with good taste, but the older man had his own object in view, and wanted to nip in the bud the very idea of any possible engagement between the two.

George sat down near the table and covered his face with his hand. When he looked up some of the hope and fire of youth had died for ever in his eyes, but in its place there was a settled and dogged look of resolution.

"May I ask you to send for Margery—Miss Farraday—and tell her of your decision?" he asked.

"Certainly," replied Sir Alec, and touched the bell.

When Margery entered the room the hearts of both men were touched. She came in so sure of youth and happiness, her head held high, her cheeks pink, and a tender little smile of joy on her lips.

George sprang forward to meet her, and their hands had met before Sir Alec could speak.

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"Mr. Targett," said he coldly, "I must request you not to take such liberties with Miss Farraday. Marnie girl, this young man wants to marry you, and has urged your mutual love as his only recommendation. I have been obliged to refuse him, Margery; I do not consider him a fit husband for you; he has no prospects and is too poor to keep you in the position and comfort you have been accustomed to. You must give him up, Margery. I am sure you don't care much for him, you have only known him for three months."

"Daddy!" cried Margery in amazement, "I can't believe you are in earnest! Oh, Daddy, surely you cannot be so cruel!"

Her face had grown pale and her distended eyes had a look of horror in them. Sir Alec's heart contracted, his first-born child was specially dear to him.

"You don't understand, darling," he said, holding out his hand, "I am not cruel. It is because I love you so, because I want you to be happy, that I cannot give my consent. I should be cruel if I allowed you to marry into poverty and misery."

Margery would not see her father's outstretched hand; she walked up to George and stood beside him, looking at him with loving, fearless eyes.

"George, darling," she said, "Daddy says he will not give his consent to our marriage, so of course we can't be engaged, but remember I love you best in the whole world, and I will never marry any other man but you." Their hands met and clung together.

"Now understand," said Sir Alec, rising, "that what I have said is final. There must be no intercourse between you—no meetings, no letters. In this matter I rely on you, Mr. Targett, and treat you as an honourable man.

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Marnie girl, I am glad you are so obedient, and have given up all idea of ever being engaged to Mr. Targett; you will soon get over it and forget all about him."

"I do not bind myself in any way," answered George hotly. "I will meet Miss Farraday, how and when I can, and will write to her also, if it can be done. She need not disobey you, but I will not tie myself down, on any consideration. She has promised to marry no other man, and I consider myself her future husband, whatever you may have to say on the subject."

"Oh, Daddy, don't be so cruel; say we may love each other, say we may be happy," pleaded Margery, clinging to her father's arm.

"No, Marnie. Now say good-bye and go to your room. You must obey me. You are not to see him, or write to him and must give up all idea of ever marrying him. He is nothing to you, and never can be anything. Now perhaps, Mr. Targett, you will be good enough to say good-bye."

With a sob of anguish Margery cast herself into her lover's arms, and he clasped her to his breast. Their lips met and clung together.

"Be brave, little love," he whispered; "don't give way. I shall never cease to love you; be brave, darling."

The small white fingers clung despairingly to his coat, and Sir Alec saw with grudging admiration that George gently unclasped them, and after kissing her again passionately, put her into her father's arms.

"You must be very gentle with her, Sir Alec," said George sternly, as he faced him. "Remember I told you that she loved me, and I made no idle boast when I said that I could make her happy. For the present I leave her in your hands; good-bye."

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He walked out of the house, his head high ; and, although his face was white and set, no one meeting him would have suspected that he was nearly blind with misery. He walked on heedless of whither his steps led him ; he felt as if fate had served him with wanton and malicious cruelty ; only that very day had he heard that Margery loved him, only that morning had she lain in his arms ; Sir Alec, always so genial and friendly, had treated him with galling contempt ; he had turned him ignominiously out of the house and forbidden all intercourse with Margery. A bitter torrent of rage and misery swept over him and he cursed his Creator, Sir Alec, and himself, in the impotence of his passion. His imagination pictured to him the pressure that would be brought to bear on his gentle and innocent little love, while he would be far away in London, powerless to help her ; he pictured her grief, her sorrow, and her helplessness. Perhaps they would persuade her to marry Jim Dudsworth—this last torturing thought was too much for George's self-control—he staggered, and a faint moan came to his lips. He looked round him with wild bloodshot eyes and saw that his reckless steps had carried him on to the heath. With a cry of passionate relief he flung himself face downwards on the earth, while he wrestled and struggled with the first great sorrow of his life. His hands grasped fiercely at the short roots and ferns about him, and the waters of desolation seemed to meet and close above his head. For over an hour he lay thus, then the good green earth, fulfilling her mission, gradually restored him to his senses, and gave him calmness and strength. His storm-tossed soul crept humbly back to its Creator, and the balance of his mind re-asserted itself, after his bitter struggle.

He sat up and looked around. All about him was

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peace and beauty—the strange deep stillness of a Sabbath afternoon in the country. The soothing influence of the solitude and the hour sank into his soul, and he realised that he had arisen from his Gethsemane a saner and better man.

“I must dree my weird,” he murmured to himself, as he stumbled with uneven steps back to the Lodge. “I suppose I deserve all this suffering, and I must make the best I can of my life. I must be strong and patient—strong to work for her, and patient to wait for her—oh, the bitterness of the waiting when I think of the hopelessness of it, and the chance that some other hand may pluck her from me while I am waiting to get her—my little tender darling, my little while soul! God bless her!”

Nathaniel showed his wisdom by making no remarks when George gave him baldly the incidents of the day. He might, had he been a woman, turned round and said: “I told you so. I warned you that Sir Alec would never consent,” but the old man felt too keenly the sorrow that was overwhelming his boy to add another pang to the already overburdened heart.

With silent sympathy he helped George to pack his belongings, and saw him off in the train early the following morning. He wore a brave smiling face as long as his nephew was in sight, but as soon as the train had turned the curve, Nathaniel walked slowly home with painful thoughts, and a heavy heart.

“My bright, handsome boy! How wretched and ill he looks, I am sure he never slept all night. It would have been better if he had never set eyes on Margery, but kept up his friendship with that lovely Mrs. Reubens. Sir Alec has certainly a warp in his character—the purse-proud

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hypocrite! I could almost pray God to curse him for this piece of work—my poor dear lad!”

Clearly Nathaniel was not a philosopher. His mind had not the balance and judgment of reason that might have been expected from his age and profession.

CHAPTER VIII

LIFE in London was inexpressibly dreary at first to George, but Durward Richardson had a large and ever-growing practice, so that he very quickly found his time fully occupied. When George had arrived suddenly, ten days before he was expected, Richardson was delighted, quickly introduced him to all his patients, and showed him the work he wished him to undertake. The days were too busy to admit of any time for brooding and grief; the early mornings were spent in receiving those who cared to call for medical advice, from eleven to one they visited at patients' private residences, the afternoons were taken up with more visiting, and during the evenings George devoted himself to study. The night-calls Richardson answered in person during the first months of George's partnership, but he frankly confessed that he was anxiously awaiting the time when he could shift this, the most onerous part of his profession, on to George's shoulders.

The first month had passed, and weary and tedious though he had found it at first, George became accustomed to the routine, and keenly interested in his various cases; his letters to Nathaniel became more hopeful, and the old man trusted that it was merely a question of time before he regained his normal spirits. One morning George read a notice in one of the society papers to the effect that

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Mr. Ezra Reubens had rented a house in Park Lane where he intended to reside for some time, and that his brother and sister-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Ephraim Reubens, were staying with him. It was not long after this he met Ezra casually one day, while he was visiting one of the richest and most fashionable of Richardson's patients. He had left the sick-room and was coming down stairs when he heard a well-known voice, and came face to face with Ezra Reubens.

"Hallo, my dear boy!" said the latter, heartily grasping his hand. "This is an unexpected pleasure! I heard you were in London, and had joined a Dr. Richardson in partnership, but I had no idea we should meet so soon. How are you, my dear George? Why did you not wait for me? I could have done better for you than this Richardson. Why did you not accept my offer? You were in too much of a hurry, you should have waited till I came, and then we could have been together again."

George was glad that Ezra had taken the matter in this light. He had no wish to quarrel with his former friend, for whom he still felt great esteem and affection. Ezra was too sure of his wealth, influence and position to suspect the real state of affairs, and thought that George had fixed himself up with Dr. Richardson owing to a want of money, and that he could not afford to wait for the Reubens' very undecided movements.

"I am indeed glad to see you again, Ezra, and am pleased to find you looking so fit. I hope Mr. and Mrs. Ephraim are well?"

A shadow and a frown darkened Ezra's face.

"Stephanie is well, thank you, George, but you will notice a great change in Ephraim. We cannot find out what ails him; I have taken him all over Europe, and we

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have consulted the cleverest physicians in the world ; no one can say what is wrong with him, and of course until we find out the cause we cannot tackle the disease. Poor Stephanie is very upset over the matter. Ephraim is dying before our eyes, and we can do nothing to help him."

Ezra's voice shook with feeling. Like most of his race he was essentially emotional and sentimental over his own kith and kin, and he would gladly have parted with half his wealth to restore his brother to health again.

"I am sorry to hear this. Since when has Ephraim been ailing? He was well enough and looked in the pink of condition when I said good-bye to all of you after our voyage from New York."

"Yes, his illness dates from our visit to Paris. As you may remember, we left you in London, and crossed over that very night. From Paris we went to Vienna, and it was then that I became seriously alarmed ; however, we cannot talk here. You must come and see us ; Stephanie was remarking the other day that you had not called."

"My partner, Dr. Durward Richardson, is very anxious to meet you," said George, suddenly remembering his promise to effect an introduction.

"Ask his wife to drop their cards on Stephanie, and you can all dine with us some night ; let it be soon, George, I have missed you a good bit, my boy. I only wish you had had a little patience and waited until I came to London ; but we prolonged our stay on the Continent on account of Ephraim. Well, good-bye, good-bye," and with another hearty handshake Ezra passed on.

George told Richardson of this meeting, and the doctor was delighted at the prospect of meeting the man whose writings he admired so much. The following day Mrs.

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Richardson called at the Reubens' house in Park Lane, and very shortly they received cards for a dinner there. George was genuinely and very deeply in love with Margery, but he was aware that he looked forward to meeting Stephanie again, and although his anticipations were not entirely of unmixed pleasure, still he was very glad to have even this ray of interest and excitement to cheer up the dull gloominess of his present path.

Dr. and Mrs. Richardson drove George to Park Lane in their carriage, and as they entered the vast white and gold drawing-room, where Stephanie was receiving her guests, her wonderful beauty struck all of them. She looked regally lovely; her dark head, which she carried majestically, was crowned with diamonds; her tall, richly developed figure was magnificently gowned, she looked an empress among women.

When her eyes met his, George was wretchedly conscious of a thrill that shot through him, and his hand was not quite steady as it met hers. It was a large party, and he saw no more of Stephanie during dinner than the curve of her cheek and chin. Ephraim did not appear, and George noticed an empty place at the table, and it seemed to him that from time to time Ezra watched the door, and looked as if he were longing and yet dreading to see his brother enter the room. Fresh guests arrived after dinner; several people played and sang, and a long evening passed. Men crowded round Stephanie like bees about clover; whenever she moved she was the centre of a respectfully adoring crowd. George did not go near her, but listened to her singing and watched her beautiful face from a distance, while he kept poor Mrs. Richardson from feeling lonely.

All the time that he acknowledged the charm and fascination that Stephanie's beauty still had for him, George

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knew that his love, such as it had been for her, was dead, and that little Margery Farraday held the whole of his heart in her child-like hands. He rejoiced at the knowledge, he felt glad that he was free from the chains that Stephanie's marvellous beauty had once woven around him, and even though his love for Margery seemed hopeless enough at that time, still it was a clean, wholesome passion, and he felt more honour in waiting and hoping for the chance of being her husband at some dim future date than he would have done had he been the acknowledged lover and possessor of the proud and radiant hostess of the evening.

About eleven o'clock Dr. Richardson came in search of his wife, with many apologies for having kept her out so late. They shook hands and said good-night to their hostess, and Stephanie said softly in an aside to George:—

“Don't go yet, do wait until the others have gone. I don't think they will be much later now, and I have not spoken to you all the evening.”

He was very much tempted to refuse, but the pleading look in her eyes deterred him.

“I will remain a little longer, Ezra wishes to see me after his other guests have gone,” he said to Dr. Richardson as he handed them into their carriage.

“Wonderful man—Mr. Reubens—quite one of the most remarkable men I have met—he has given me a new idea as regards radium; his theory is well worth working out,” said Durward thoughtfully.

“Mrs. Ephraim is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” said his wife.

Meanwhile George waited until most of the guests had gone, and as Ezra was still talking to a little knot of men, Stephanie summoned George to her side, and they sat on

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a sofa at the far end of the spacious drawing-room, and were virtually alone, for the ordinary tones of conversation could not carry so far.

"Thank you for waiting to talk to me, George. I thought perhaps you would not mind. I have been waiting to see you for so long, and you have never found time to come and see me."

"I left my cards one afternoon," he murmured apologetically.

"Yes, I received them. However, Ezra tells me that you are a very busy, hardworking man, so I'll forgive you. But O George," suddenly dropping the gay lightness of her tone, "O dear, dear George, I am in such trouble." Her lovely eyes, misty with suffering, looked beseechingly at him.

George began to feel very uncomfortable; he could not tell her bluntly and brutally that his feelings had changed, and she seemed to take it for granted that he was still desperately in love with her. Then again, she had appealed to him—she was in trouble—he felt he could not do less than sympathise with her, and, after all, she was so very, very lovely. He turned and said kindly :—

"What is the matter, Mrs. Reubens—what is worrying you? Can I help you in any way?"

"*Mrs. Reubens!* O George!" and a sob rose to her lips.

"We are in a public room, and you are a married woman."

"But you used not to think of that before."

Her eyes had tears in them, and he could see her bosom heaving. Poor George writhed, above all things he did not want a scene,

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"What is it? What is your trouble, Stephanie? Those men over there will notice that something is wrong—don't cry, for heaven's sake!"

"No, I am not going to cry, George. I only felt very hurt at your coldness, and thought perhaps you had changed, and I could not bear that, just now—it would kill me, I think."

George felt as thoroughly wretched and unhappy as he had ever done in his life.

"But I must not imagine things. I am sure you are the same, and when we are alone you must convince me that you have not changed. I have enough of real troubles, without seeking others. George," sinking her voice to a whisper, "Ephraim is going mad!"

George started. "Good heavens! Whatever makes you dream of such a thing?"

"It is terrible, terrible," she said, twisting her fingers together, "we can do nothing, Ezra and I, and the doctors can do nothing, and I am in fear of my life. You don't know what it is to go to bed every night, George, and not know if you will be murdered in your sleep before morning. Every night!" she shuddered and clasped her hand over her eyes.

"But how—I don't understand—why should he wish to murder you? And why don't you have your maid to sleep in your room?" asked George. "With all his faults, I always thought that he loved you very dearly; I cannot understand why he should want to murder you. When did all this begin?"

"He was perfectly well until we went to Paris, and there he met a Mr. Nicholopaulo, a Greek. They became very, very friendly, and I noticed a slight change in Ephraim almost at once. This Nicholopaulo travelled

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with us to Vienna and there they went in for spiritualism and hypnotism to a vast extent; their whole time seemed to be taken up with arranging *séances* and attending them. The Greek obtained more and more influence over Ephraim, and openly boasted that he could do what he liked with him, that he was fully in his power. There is no doubt that Nicholopaulo was a most extraordinary medium, and the results he got were wonderful—he was perfectly uncanny—most horrible things used to happen. As you know, I went in for spiritualism myself when we were in America, I loved it there, it seemed a most beautiful and consoling pastime, and quite harmless—but the awful things that happened when Nicholopaulo was with us in Vienna opened my eyes; they made me too nervous to go on, and the *séances* were a great strain on my nerves—the reaction afterwards used to be terrible. Ezra insisted on my giving it up and I was only too thankful to do so. Well, as I was saying, Ephraim became quite wild and unsettled in Vienna, and from there Nicholopaulo took him to Constantinople to consult some great authority on spiritualism—a sort of wizard or magician, I think he posed as. Ezra was going too, but at the last moment he found he could not get away—oh, thank heaven! thank heaven! whatever should I have done, if he had gone mad too?”

She clasped her hands together and made a mighty effort to get control over her nerves. George felt profoundly sorry for her, she had evidently come through a severe strain.

“And Ephraim went to Constantinople with this Nicholopaulo?” he asked wonderingly.

“Yes, as I told you before, he went there. Oh, merciful God! When he came back ——”

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"Hush, do be careful. Those men over there may wonder why you are so agitated."

She pressed her handkerchief against her trembling lips.

"Ezra says it's nerves—no doctor can understand his case—we have been everywhere, tried everything. George," looking at him with unutterable horror in her eyes, "George, he is possessed."

"Possessed? What rot!—excuse me, Stephanie; but how on earth—what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say, George, he is possessed of a devil, of a wild and unclean spirit. Now you see why I am driven mad with fear; it is not Ephraim—kind, lazy, good-hearted, happy Ephraim—it is—some other—some dreadful, awful agency acting through him. This is what spiritualism has done for all of us, where it has led us. Ezra has almost given it up—I am thankful to say."

"And what became of the Greek, Nicholopaulo? Did he also return mad from Constantinople?"

Stephanie was silent for a few minutes, then she said in a hard, strained voice.

"He never returned. He has disappeared."

"But what does Ephraim say about it?—how does he account for his disappearance?"

"Ephraim says that he is dead, and that the wizard in Constantinople killed him; but no one has heard any details, and no one has inquired about him; he has gone off the scene, let us hope for ever, but Ephraim remains, and his state is driving me frantic with terror." She was twisting and turning her lace handkerchief between her long nervous fingers.

"I am so sorry for you, Stephanie! it does not sound much in the way of sympathy, but if I can ever do anything for you, at any time, I shall be only too happy to be

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of any use to you. You must take a good nerve tonic and get away to the sea-side. At any rate, give Ephraim an entirely separate suite of rooms until he becomes normal and rational again. Don't be nervous about Ephraim, there is no such thing as possession by an evil spirit nowadays. His nerves are playing tricks with him, and he wants to be under treatment." Ezra joined them at that minute, and George repeated what he had just said to Stephanie. His host quite agreed with him and begged him to come over again as soon as he could.

"You have done Stephanie good—see, she has a little colour in her cheeks to-night; you must come again soon, George, and bring your clever friend Dr. Richardson; I like talking to him, he is quite original in some of his ideas. He was telling me that he is leaving London in a day or two and taking his wife abroad; then you will be in sole charge?"

"He will only be absent for a week or ten days, but I shall of course be very busy while he is away. On his return, if I may, I will call and see you again."

"Come at any time, you will always be welcome. The house is as much yours as if you were staying with me—I only wish you were," said Ezra, and Stephanie's eyes told George the same thing.

They sent him home in their *coupé*, a luxurious motor they had brought from Paris. George felt strangely unsettled and ill at ease as he was whirled back from Park Lane to Kensington. The events of the evening—meeting Stephanie again and the disturbing news she had given him of Ephraim—were quite sufficient in themselves to account for this state of mind, added to which he was haunted by a sense of impending evil, and the knowledge that he would have a very unhappy quarter of an hour when he

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explained to Stephanie that his heart's love had changed, and that he was practically engaged to a little girl in the country. A few days later Richardson left him alone while he took his wife to Nice, and then it was a case with George of working day and night, with barely time in which to snatch some hasty meals. After a week had passed he was heartily glad that Richardson's stay abroad would not be prolonged, for he was feeling quite worn out with the unaccustomed strain of the responsibility and the night work.

He returned one afternoon from a round of visits feeling dog-tired, and he was vexed when the doctor's page told him that a lady was waiting to see him in the consulting room. A card was handed to him, and to his surprise he saw that it was from Mrs. Ephraim Reubens, and that she had written on it in pencil—"I have met with an accident.—S." George went quickly into the consulting room, after throwing off his heavy coat. Stephanie was lying back in an easy-chair, her face ghastly against the dark veil she wore, and clad in a long, fur-lined motoring coat.

"What has happened?" he asked in alarm.

She did not rise from her seat, and could hardly frame the words with her white lips:—

"Ezra is away—he left last night—I could not go to a stranger—so I came to you"; she closed her eyes, the exertion of speaking had been too much for her, and George saw that she had fainted.

He went quickly into the next room, where Dr. Richardson always kept a supply of medicines, and mixed her a strong restorative. She opened her eyes after he had forced a few drops between her teeth, and when she had finished drinking it, and saw George's anxious face bending over her, a smile of happiness came to her lips.

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"I am better now," she said faintly; "but you had better see to my arm."

She tried to throw off her heavy coat, but George saw that it was too much for her strength, and helped her to take it off. Then he saw that the sleeve of her rich velvet dress had been torn off, and that on the upper part of her arm there was a strange round discoloration, about an inch in diameter, and on examination he found that the skin had been punctured in an even circle with sharp, spear-like stabs, and that the blood had congealed on the top of each of the wounds.

"How on earth did this happen?" he asked.

"Ephraim bit me," replied Stephanie. "Please put some disinfectant on it, I feel very queer."

All the time that he was ministering to her George's mind was in a whirl of amazement. After he had washed the wound and used an antiseptic he bound up her arm, and helping her into her coat gave her a glass of wine. "Now, tell me how it happened," he said, gravely studying her white face.

"Ezra went away last night. Since last week Ephraim has been using a suite of rooms on the ground floor; Ezra came in the day after you spoke to me, and found Ephraim smashing all the things in my dressing-room, and tearing my dresses down from the cupboards, and he ordered him downstairs, and told him never to set his foot into my rooms until he knew how to behave himself. Ephraim was madder than ever after that, and I always sleep now with very strong locks and bolts to my door. Ezra told nobody except me that he was leaving London."

"Where has he gone?" asked George.

"He had a wire from Paris, and left word that he hopes to return by to-morrow morning. I locked myself in my

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room, and the night passed all right ; my maid brought me my breakfast to my room, and I dressed intending to go for a drive and do some shopping. I sent the maid to order the *coupé*, and then I heard, as I thought, Ezra's voice at the door, saying : ' I have returned, Stephanie ; open the door for a minute '. I went and opened it, so gladly, feeling relieved to hear Ezra's voice, but there stood Ephraim, unwashed, his hair all rumped, his eyes bloodshot, and still in his dinner clothes."

" What hour was this ? "

" About noon. I screamed in sudden terror, for the wild savage look in his eyes terrified me, and he sprang into the room, caught hold of me and tore at my dress ; he wrenched my sleeve off, and then, saying, ' I'll do for you, as Mazuffa did for Paul,' he suddenly put his head down. I felt a hot, stinging pain in my arm, and I fainted. The strangest part of it all is, that, as he bent over me I got a vile, horrid smell ; I cannot describe how loathsome it was, it turned me perfectly sick, and I still feel quite ill when I think of it." George took her handkerchief and poured some Eau-de-Cologne on it, for he noticed she was looking very white again. She gave him a tender little smile and allowed her hand to rest on his for a second, as she thanked him.

" I was unconscious until four o'clock this afternoon," she went on. " My maid and the other servants came rushing up, and they did their best for me, but they could not bring me round for hours. As soon as I regained sufficient strength, I got into the *coupé* and came to you. I would not allow them to send for a doctor, although, of course, that was the first thing they wanted to do. I cannot understand why I am still feeling so weak and faint."

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"You have lost a great quantity of blood," said George gravely, "at least that is my deduction from the condition of your heart and your pulse. It looks to me like the work of a lunatic. Ephraim has drawn out somehow—by suction I should think—a very large amount of blood, and of course it has weakened you considerably; had you not been so strong and full-blooded you would have been dead by this time; but, as it is, you will soon I hope recover your usual strength again. I am going to order you some hot beef-tea, so sit still for a few minutes, please, Stephanie; I cannot allow you to go home until you are feeling stronger."

It was very soothing to her to have George looking after her; she felt safe and secure in his hands, and he, in common humanity, could not do less than he would for any patient in such straits.

While she sipped her hot soup he took his belated tea, and they sat in front of the cosy fire and almost insensibly their thoughts and conversation reverted to their past life together in New York. Outside the winter evening was bleak and wet, and Stephanie shivered as the wind drove the rain against the window-pane in fierce gusts.

"I wish I could stop here," she said. "I feel so peaceful and secure now, but as soon as I go back I know I shall have a return of all my nervous fears."

"I would ask you to remain, and in fact insist upon your doing so, if Mrs. Richardson or the doctor were here; but as it is, I am afraid I cannot manage it. However, I will take you home and put you safely into your room, and then I will see Ephraim, and, if necessary, I will get another doctor and we will have him locked up, at any rate until Ezra returns. He must be mad—there can be no other explanation of his conduct. Don't worry, Ste-

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phanie, and don't be nervous. I will guarantee your safety until Ezra returns; and then I shall hand you over to him and give him a piece of my mind. I shall advise him strongly to have Ephraim put under proper control. It is certainly not safe for a lunatic of his stamp to be at large."

CHAPTER IX

GEORGE accompanied Stephanie home, and remained with her while she had some dinner. On inquiring, they learnt that Ephraim had left the house while Stephanie was still unconscious, and that he had not yet returned. George, by Stephanie's desire, returned in the *coupé*, after leaving her in the hands of her maid, and cautioning her not to open her door on any consideration until the following morning, and promising to come as early as he could to see her, and to hear how she had passed the night.

"Ezra will be home by eight or nine, and I shall feel safe then," she said as she bade him good-night, and thanked him for all he had done for her.

He was dreadfully tired when he turned into bed, and devoutly hoped that no patient would ring him up during the night. He was doomed to disappointment, for about one o'clock the night-bell rang, and the sleepy page-boy announced that a Mr. Gresham of Elgin Crescent had called him up. Mr. Gresham was an old man, seriously ill with pneumonia, so George made the best of a bad bargain, and hastily swallowing a cup of coffee, always kept heated on the stove, he slipped into his clothes and great-coat, and set out.

It was a short walk, but during the few minutes it took him to reach Elgin Crescent, he had a most uncomfortable

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impression that he was being followed. He turned round quickly once or twice, but could see no one whom he could suspect of doing such a thing. He put his impression down to imagination, and the echo of his footsteps in the silent and deserted streets. During the hour that he was busily engaged attending to the poor old man, who had had a relapse, the occurrence went out of his mind; but as he came out of the house and walked up the street he heard distinctly a soft, shuffling footstep, and quick, uneven breathing behind him. He was by no means a nervous man, but he felt distinctly uncomfortable as he swung quickly round. The shuffling noise seemed to vanish into a dark doorway and he was going to follow it up and investigate the doorway when he saw a tall, muffled figure at the far end of the street. Not another soul was in sight, and George could not remember seeing a policeman on his way to the Crescent. Acting on impulse, he walked quickly towards the approaching figure, and to his surprise saw it was that of a dark-skinned Oriental, with a heavy grey beard, clad in a long black overcoat that reached nearly to the ground, and with a woollen comforter twisted round and round his head like a turban. Both men stopped as they met face to face under a lamp, and George said :—

“ Pardon, I mistook you for somebody else,” and was turning away when the Oriental spoke.

“ Continue on your way—you are safe, for I will guard you. Tell him whom you will find in your house that his hour has come, and that Mazuffa has come to claim that which belongs to him.”

As he spoke George noticed his protruding lips which closed over his long fang-like teeth, and his words came in a guttural, snarling voice that jarred every nerve in

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George's body. A feeling of physical loathing came over him, and it seemed to him that the air was heavy with a fusty odour that appeared to hang about the Oriental, or at any rate proceed from his garments. With a muttered excuse, George turned sharply and walked away, and as he did so he heard a low mocking laugh that made him unreasonably mad with rage.

He let himself into the house with his latch-key and to his surprise found the page-boy was asleep on the chair in the hall. He jumped up as George touched him and said :—

“There's a gentlemen, sir, a-waiting for you in your room. He said he was awful cold, and wanted to know where there was a fire, and I said as how your room had the only fire going during the night, and he said to take him up, and when you came in to tell you that a Mr. Reubens was waiting to see you.”

For a moment George wondered if Ezra had returned unexpectedly, but on second thoughts he knew this was impossible, and he realised that it was Ephraim who was in his room waiting for him.

He hesitated for a second ; it was not exactly fear, for he knew Ephraim was a weak, puny man ; but the events of the night had disturbed him, and even the bravest might dread spending some hours alone in a room with a suspected madman.

He was given no option to refuse, for his rooms being on the ground floor Ephraim had heard him come in, and, opening the door, he walked out on the landing.

“Is that you, George?” he asked, peering about him ; “did no one else come in with you?”

To George's surprise he spoke and looked as sane as when he had last seen him, six months before, and the

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dominant note in his voice was fear, and he was shivering, either with cold or nervous terror.

Quite reassured, George threw off his coat and drew him into his warm bedroom.

“No one came in with me, Ephraim; but what brings you here at this hour of the night?”

In the well-lighted room George could see plainly the ravages that the past months had made in the man cowering over the fire before him. He had always been physically weak and slenderly built, his arms and legs like spindles, and his chest sunk in, but now he looked like an animated skeleton, his eyes, which were dull and glazed, having black circles round them, the whites were bloodshot, and his skin had become the colour and seeming texture of old parchment. He had great hollows in his temples, and his hands looked like claws.

To George it appeared as if the whole character and nature of Ephraim's face had changed; his slightly aquiline, Hebraic nose had not altered in shape, but it had lost its fleshy outline and looked like a beak; his eyes seemed to be closer together and had a narrow, unpleasant slant that was certainly new to them; and the formerly loose, good-natured, thick-lipped mouth had taken a sinister and vicious curve.

George felt intense pity for him, as he watched the twitching of his hands, and saw the furtive glances he cast all around him, and quite understood that Ezra would hesitate a long time before he condemned this weak, terror-stricken wretch to the horrors of perpetual supervision and restraint in a mad-house.

“I came in here for shelter,” said Ephraim, “I followed you to the house in Elgin Crescent, and meant to speak to you on your way home, but I suddenly found I was being

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followed, and when you turned round to speak to—to speak to—Him—I darted forward, and ran here, taking refuge in your house.”

George saw that Ephraim was labouring under strong excitement, and knowing how bad it was for him, in the present state of his nerves, he said soothingly :—

“That is all right, Ephraim, you are very welcome and can spend the night here with me, if you like. Have a cup of coffee, old man? I’ve got it hot here, I always keep it ready, in case I have to go out during the night; it’s a dodge Richardson taught me.”

George poured out a cup and handed it to Ephraim, who gulped it down as if his throat was parched.

“Did you speak to him? What did he say?”

“Whom do you mean? What are you referring to?” asked George, thinking it better to appear not to understand the question.

“The man you went up to—the tall man at the end of the street—did you notice his face? Did you speak to him?”

“He was a perfect stranger to me,” said George slowly, carelessly poking at the fire as he spoke, “and seeing that it could not be he who was following me, I merely remarked that I had mistaken him for some one I knew and walked away. The street was very dark, how could I observe his features?”

Ephraim did not reply for a few minutes, and George drew forward an easy-chair and sat on the opposite side of the fire, enjoying his pipe. He had already offered Ephraim a smoke, but the latter refused, saying he only smoked his own brand of cigarettes, and that he had none with him.

“I am all right to-night,” said Ephraim suddenly, drawing a deep breath and a long sigh as he spoke. “I

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feel like my old self again, but I wonder what it means? Perhaps I am going to die, to-night, eh? Mazuffa means mischief, I know that, but I can't understand why I am so—different—and clear—to-night. I have not felt like this for months."

George wisely held his peace, and Ephraim went on again :—

"You know how you feel when you've had a little too much to drink? Not enough to make you insensible and lie like a log, but sufficient to make everything hazy and indistinct, and to make you feel as if your arms and legs did not belong to you, but were obeying the commands of some other person?"

George nodded and smiled, he had had one or two bursts in his younger days.

"That's how I have been feeling for months—and mind you, I don't drink. I have been feeling just as if my whole being, body and soul, were at the bid of some one else, some one living inside of me, and yet quite distinct from me; I wonder if you can understand what I am trying to say? I certainly don't understand it myself, and am only endeavouring to let you know how I have been feeling lately. I don't suppose you ever heard of symptoms like mine before? All the events that have happened during the past few months are vague and misty, like the remembrance of a half-forgotten dream. To-night, about eight or nine o'clock, I suddenly felt giddy and sick; I was in a quiet street at the time, and I clung to the railings of a house, for I don't know how long, and I felt as if strong hands were wringing and twisting my body. I was in agony for some time, and although it is bitterly cold to-night, the sweat rolled off me in drops. Then I felt suddenly quite limp, empty and faint, and I

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would have fallen but that some one put an arm round me to steady me. I availed myself of the help, and leaning like that, half unconscious, I saw quite close to me, and grinning at me, with awful eyes and jaws all red with blood, a face—the face—the spirit—the devil I got to know intimately in some of my former psychical researches. I fell back, and closed my eyes, but I thought I heard some one say: ‘I leave you—at my master’s bidding—but, I shall return’. I can remember nothing more until I was conscious that some one was pouring brandy down my throat. I sat up, got on my feet after a few seconds, and tried to walk home. As I went slowly along I saw a tall man following me, and I waited near a lighted shop window to see who it was. It was a jeweller’s shop, and I stood with my back to the street, looking in at the reflector, and I distinctly saw Mazuffa’s face grinning at my reflection in the mirror. I leaned against the shop for a few minutes, feeling dead with horror, and when I looked round again he had gone. It was about ten o’clock then, and I thought I had better have something to eat, so I had some hot supper at a small Italian restaurant, and when I felt better I made up my mind to come to you. When I got to your house it was all in darkness, and I was going away when I saw a tall man in a long dark overcoat walking up and down on the other side of the street. I crept into a doorway and hid myself. A messenger came for you later, and you went out. I followed you, hoping I should get a chance of speaking to you; but I knew Mazuffa was dogging my footsteps, and I did not dare to risk it. What happened while you were coming home you know.”

He sighed, and closing his eyes leaned back in the chair, as if absolutely worn out.

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"Who is—Mazuffa?" asked George at length, "and why are you so afraid of him?"

Ephraim sat up and cast apprehensive glances all round the room.

"Ssh—sh—hush—He might hear you. He is more than a devil,—He is a fiend possessed by many devils—He has almost unlimited power," and Ephraim's teeth chattered nervously, as his terror-stricken mind recalled the evidences he had seen of Mazuffa's capabilities.

"Don't worry, Ephraim, old chap, don't let this fellow, whoever he is, get on your nerves. You are quite safe in here with me—and the page-boy sleeps in a small room off the landing. The hall door is securely locked, if you like I'll lock the door of this room also."

George got up as he spoke, and, with a laugh, turned the key in the door of the room. Ephraim did not look much relieved—on the contrary, he shivered again, and his teeth chattered, as if with ague.

"Don't go to bed, George, I don't want to be left alone. I'm sorry to keep you up like this, but I feel as if everything was suddenly different. I wonder if the change is in myself, or in my surroundings? I feel as if—I scarcely know how to express it—as if I had only a few hours to live—the horror of it seems to turn my blood to ice—and I feel powerless to fight against my destiny."

"This is all rot, old chap, a bad case of nerves, pure and simple. Have yourself thoroughly overhauled by a good doctor, and get Ezra to engage a companion for you, some one with a little knowledge of medicine would be best, and you will soon be quite yourself again. I won't say in a week, or a month, for it will take time, but I give you my word that if you'll take my advice, and follow it out, you will be quite your old self again within a year."

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George spoke with cheerful confidence, and the drooping spirits of the poor wretch, cowering over the fire, seemed to revive.

"You are quite certain, George? You are not saying this to gammon me, and make me buck up?"

"Give you my word of honour," said George solemnly and in good faith. "I can't see why on earth you are so despondent over yourself. I can honestly assure you, it's a simple case of nervous breakdown."

Ephraim shook his head, but it seemed to George that he looked a little brighter and better, and the nervous chatter of his teeth had stopped.

"Can I offer you anything, old man? Have a whisky and seltzer, or brandy, or port wine, or anything?"

"I never take any wine, or spirit, thank you, George—I wish I did,—I wish I could. You see, when I first went in for spiritualism I went the whole hog, and that meant a lot of physical training at the start—I had to get my body into proper relations with my spirit before I could get any results at all; now I get frightfully sick if I take any alcohol or rich food of any kind. I am practically a vegetarian, not by choice but by necessity. I tell you, George," he said suddenly, with a burst of confidence, "it's a hell of a life I've had—not a mild, metaphysical sort of Hades, but a regular tearing, grinding, agonising existence. Bah!" he said, shivering again, "what fools men are to touch what they cannot understand, and to try to grasp at knowledge that is not meant for their puny intellects. They think they can control and direct spirits that are mightier and greater than the highest intelligence any man can conceive."

"Then you absolutely believe that there are spirits—devils?"

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"Assuredly—my first peep into spiritualism showed me that, unknown to our physical senses, we are in daily and hourly contact with a vast crowd of spirits that inhabit the space surrounding us. Some are good—that is, they do no absolute evil to mankind—but most of them, I think, are bad. The spirits of the very good are not in this strata—the evil spirits won't say where they are, and they themselves have no power over the good ones. You must remember, too, that these evil spirits are all stupendously clever, they have brighter and swifter intelligences than the wisest man, and they have, in their own sphere, almost unlimited power. That was why I did not feel secure when you locked your door; they can see and hear, and force their way through any material substance of any density."

"I am afraid I cannot believe in spirits—good or bad. How is it that ordinary people, like myself, don't get cognisance of these beings? And, if we are to believe all they tell us, how is it that so many spiritualists meet only good spirits?"

Ephraim shrugged his shoulders.

"Until a man steps over the boundary line that the Creator has placed between spirits and human beings no spirit without sanction from the Highest, can approach any man or woman, or in any way have intercourse, direct or indirect, with mankind. The minute that a man goes in for spiritualism seriously, he tears down the barriers of safety, and may—if he goes far enough—fall into communication and touch with the vilest and wickedest evil spirits, and they will, if they can get sufficient hold over him, lead him, twist him and use him for their own vile purposes, often inhabiting his body, once they have obtained power over his will. As for spiritualists saying that they only encounter *good* spirits—they lie—or, at least,

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they are deceived. Evil spirits can clothe themselves in many shapes, and always assume some good, benignant form at the beginning. It is only afterwards, when they are sure of their victim, that they show themselves in their true colours. I am a living example of the curse of spiritualism—it does no good and never will do any. It simply satisfies morbid curiosity, and indulges our vitiated appetites for anything strange, new, and incomprehensible.”

Ephraim shivered again, and George noticed that, after the excitement of speaking had passed away, his face looked more wan and drawn than before, and that there were darker purple rings round his eyes.

“Won't you lie down, old chap, and get a sleep?” asked George, pointing to his bed.

“No, thanks, I couldn't. But you are tired out, go to bed; it is past three o'clock and I know you have hard work just now. I'll rest in this chair by the fire. Get into bed, George. I feel much better, and shall be all right, I hope, soon.”

George was too tired to resist. He undressed and threw himself into the bed, leaving Ephraim seated by the fire, with the light burning brightly. His last conscious words before he fell asleep, were:—

“Wake me if you want anything; now don't fail to wake me. I'm awfully sleepy—but I'll get up in a second, if you call me.”

Sleep came to him at once, the heavy sleep of exhaustion. It seemed to him that scarcely had he closed his eyes when he became dimly conscious of a noise, a discordant, grinding, jarring sound that reached him even through the depth of his slumber. He tried to rouse himself, but nature was too strong, he could not open his eyes or lift his head from the pillow, and after a brief, ineffectual

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struggle, he fell asleep again. His repose was disturbed, and this time he seemed to be struggling with a hideous dream. Then he became gradually conscious of a feeling of suffocation, he wondered vaguely what was pressing on his chest, and if some one had fastened a steel collar tightly round his neck; with a mighty effort, he started into full possession of his senses. To his horror, the sensation he had felt was not due to sleep or caused by any nightmare, for he realised that the weight on his chest was caused by a human body, and that long nervous fingers, like iron talons, were closely clasped around his throat. He put out all his energy and with a sudden spring unseated his would-be murderer, and tore the clinging fingers from about his neck. As the drumming and rushing in his head ceased, and as his eyes became clear, he saw Ephraim grovelling on the floor before him.

The gas had been put out, the fire had burnt low and gave an uncertain light, but to his surprise he thought he saw dimly outlined in a corner of the room behind Ephraim the figure of the tall, gaunt Oriental he had met earlier in the evening. In the flicker of the firelight it looked to him as if the whole aspect of Ephraim's face had changed. The sane, reasonable being who had discussed spiritualism with him earlier that same night, bore only a faint resemblance to the man on the floor before him. The wild look in Ephraim's eyes and the whole expression of his face terrified George, he looked like a wild beast, and his crouching attitude on the floor, heightened the resemblance. A few muttered words from the corner seemed to act as a signal, the next instant Ephraim flew at him, and tearing asunder his light sleeping suit, tried to fix his teeth in George's throat.

George struck out madly, using both his fists as effectively as he could, but he knew that he was fighting with

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a madman, and that little short of a miracle could save him. The tall figure of Mazuffa moved from the corner and stood behind Ephraim, uttering short harsh words, evidently of command, from time to time.

George was conscious all the while of an overpowering and most objectionable odour that hung about him, and that was in itself poisonous enough to take away his breath. He felt as if he were fighting and wrestling there in the semi-darkness with the powers of Hell itself. An overmastering sensation of rage awoke in his breast, he gave a sudden rush towards a small table on which he kept his razors, but Ephraim was too quick for him, and with a sound between a snarl and a cry he caught him in his arms, and fixing his teeth savagely into his shoulder, hung on to him like a leech. George struggled wildly, but ineffectively. A deadly feeling of overpowering nausea overtook him, and he fell on the floor in a faint.

The first impression George received on regaining consciousness was that he heard Stephanie's voice, but he felt too tired and weak to turn his head or open his eyes.

It was late in the afternoon when he fully regained his senses. Dr. Richardson was standing with his back to him, pouring something into a glass, and seated beside his bed was Ezra.

"You—you have returned?" he said to the latter, struggling to raise himself on the pillow.

Dr. Richardson turned round quickly.

"Lie down, my good fellow, and keep quiet. We're here and you have nothing to worry about."

"Stephanie?" asked George, appealing to Ezra.

"Stephanie is quite well."

"And—Ephraim?" a shudder overtook him as he mentioned the name of his midnight visitor.

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"Ephraim is also—quite well," replied the doctor, in a calm, almost expressionless voice. "Now, my dear George, go to sleep and don't worry about anything. Everything is most satisfactory."

With a sigh of relief George slept.

It took him a few days to regain strength sufficient to walk across the room, and it was a fortnight later that he started trying open-air exercise.

Richardson made no further mention of the Reubens, and although Ezra called to see him very frequently he did not mention either Stephanie or Ephraim. At last George could bear the suspense no longer, and when Ezra was with him one morning he asked him abruptly :—

"Now, Ezra, you must tell me—what has happened to Ephraim?"

"My poor unhappy brother is dead."

"Dead? When and how?"

"The very morning that Stephanie brought me here to find you lying unconscious and nearly dead on the floor, my poor brother was discovered in an area a few streets away from here—quite dead."

"What did he die of?" asked George.

"Dr. Richardson signed his death certificate. Heart failure—he had always had a weak heart—my poor Ephraim."

Ezra put up his hand to hide the tears in his eyes.

"Was there no other cause? Did you find any marks or bruises on him?"

"Death was due to natural causes," Ezra said slowly, as if weighing his words. "He died of heart failure and—and—exhaustion. There was only one mark on him, a small wound on his throat, such as you have on your

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shoulder. We thought it best not to draw attention to the—wound—and he is dead and at peace.”

George shuddered, and was silent for some minutes.

“How is Stephanie?” he asked.

“Stephanie is getting quite well, and sends you kind messages every day. I may as well tell you that we are going abroad soon, George, to Paris, and then back to America. I shall marry Stephanie as soon as she has recovered from all the shocks and horrors of the past few weeks. I love her passionately—I have always loved her. I will do all in my power to wipe out the memory of past unhappiness. Will you wish me joy, George?”

“Of course I will—with the best heart in the world. I hope you will both be very happy, and I am sure Stephanie could not have a better or kinder man for a husband. Tell her so, please, Ezra, from me.”

“Thank you, my boy, thank you. I have longed to see my children round me, and last year I made up my mind I would marry—any one—just for the sake of a family. Little did I dare to hope that the one woman I love in all the world would be given to my arms. It has been almost too much happiness. Now, I long—ah! how I long—to see my beautiful Stephanie with her children and mine around her. You are a young man—I doubt if you can understand what I feel in the matter.”

This was an unexpected phase of Ezra's character and one that George had never even suspected existed. He quite realised that Ezra wished him to know that he was only marrying Stephanie out of love for her.

“I am glad you have your heart's desire, Ezra, and I hope you will both be happy,” was all that George could find to say in answer, although it sounded lame and halting after Ezra's passionate speech.

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A few days after this Ezra and Stephanie left for Paris. The house in Park Lane was sold, but the electric *coupé* was sent to George with a kind little note begging him to keep it, as it would be useful to him in his professional capacity. Stephanie sent him a farewell letter, thanking him for all his kindness to her and to "one who was dead," and telling him that, although changes might come into both their lives, she would always be his true and sincere friend.

CHAPTER X

WHEN George went up to London to join Dr. Richardson as junior partner, he did not forget old Joe Cutter's request. He placed all the information he possessed before a firm of detectives, with a commission to find the long-missing Nancy, knowing that they could easily accomplish what would have been an impossibility to him, single-handed, and tied down as he was by his work.

Nor was he disappointed. It was shortly after the events recorded in the last chapter that he got his first tidings of Nancy Cutter.

The detective told George of a middle-aged woman, broken down in health, who was working in one of the large wholesale fancy shops in Cheapside. The establishment was owned by a Jewish firm, Jacobstein & Co., who were notorious for their system of sweating. The poor woman's fortunes were at a very low ebb. Her scanty earnings were not sufficient for one person, and she had to keep her child, a cripple boy about eleven years of age. The child tried to help their small means by taking in light work, basket-making and the like, that he could do lying down. The woman went under the name of Mrs. Pickers. These were the details that the detective laid before George, who marvelled how they had traced the woman, and whether she were really Nancy Cutter, the

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long-lost daughter of poor old Joe. That evening at dinner George told Richardson the story.

"I am going with the detective to see her to-morrow afternoon, at about six o'clock; meanwhile I have not told old Cutter anything, in case it turns out that we've got the wrong woman. Poor soul, she is working fourteen hours a day for ten and six a week! It seems an impossibility for two people to be able to *live* on ten and six a week."

"It is not living—it is existing," replied Richardson. "I had a partnership in a practice in North London when I started, and what I don't know about poverty is not worth knowing. It taught me more, seeing and attending the poor in their homes, than I learned all the time I was in the hospitals. Broadly speaking, there are two main truths about the poor—the very poorest will always help, generously and freely, those who are as poor, or even poorer if possible than themselves; secondly, and this is what makes it so hard to help them, there is no one so wantonly wasteful and extravagant as the poorest of the poor. I gave a poor family one day a bottle of invalid port, some chicken soup and grapes for one of their children who was dangerously ill, thinking they would make the dainties last for a few days at least. When I called the following morning, not a drop was left, nor a grape. They had had a 'beano' the night before and polished off the lot. The poor will never save, they are the most thriftless and careless people under the sun."

"What are you doing at Christmas?" asked George. "Are you returning to Mrs. Richardson, or spending it in London?"

"You seem to have got up your strength fairly well, George, but still I think I had better remain here with you

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until after the New Year. It is always a busy time for me, and we are sure to have our hands full. It will be a bit slow for you, having Christmas here in town alone with me, write and ask your uncle, Mr. Targett, to come up for a week. Write off to him to-day, as it is only ten days before Christmas—well, if this poor soul turns out to be Nancy Cutter, she will have the joy of spending it beneath her father's roof, and if it happens she is not the woman you are in search of, we can still do our best to make it a happy season for her."

The following day was Saturday, and when George reached the slum where Mrs. Pickers and her child lived, they found her back from work. She was a thin, bent woman, with soft dark melancholy eyes and wisps of grey hair, her back bent, and her fingers crooked. Her son's name was Joey—another link in the chain of evidence as the detective pointed out to George; they found him a keen, bright, happy little lad, in spite of his infirmity.

The woman was defiant and mistrustful at first. She would give no answers to any questions they asked her. Then George sent away the detective, and sat down by the boy's rough bed.

"Did you know I was a doctor?" he asked, smiling into Joey's bright eyes. "How would you like to get about, even a little? How would you like to live in the country?"

"I shouldn't half like it—should I? But I've bin lying down all my life. So I 'specs I'll have to go on lying down."

"But we can do wonderful things nowadays. I know of a chair that would just suit you, and you could guide it yourself—and then perhaps you'd get strong enough for crutches, and be able to jump about like other boys."

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The outer crust of Mrs. Pickers' mistrust had melted away. She drew near the bed and smoothed the boy's dark hair with her twisted fingers.

"Do you think anything could be done for Joey, sir? I would be *that* thankful. It's always a weight hanging on my mind as to what'll become of him when I'm gone."

"I cannot tell you right off whether he will be able to use crutches, it depends on the condition of his spine, and the nature of his disease. But I can certainly get him a chair that he will be more comfortable in, and you can get him out, and give him a breath of fresh air."

"Them chairs are expensive, sir," said the poor woman sadly. "I asked about them long ago."

"I have one I can give Joey, Mrs. Pickers, and he is quite welcome to it. In return, will you do something for me?"

"Anything as I can, sir."

"Will you answer a few questions?"

Mrs. Pickers shook her head and her face hardened. Poor people have an instinctive dislike to being asked questions.

"Why don't you tell the doctor what he wants to know, Ma?" asked the boy. "Think of his giving us a chair an' all."

"How do I know what he's getting at?" she answered.

"Well, Mrs. Pickers, I'll ask you the questions, and you can answer them or not as you like. I am your friend, and it is in your interest that I am asking for information. What was your name before you ever married or left home? Where were you born? What was your father's name? Where did you live till you married and left home?"

"Is that all you want to know, sir? Well, it's easy

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answered. I was Nancy Cutter and my poor father was Joe Cutter—I called the boy after him—and we lived at a place called Forest Row till I—till I ——”

“Ran away from home,” put in George quietly. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Pickers, you have told me all I want to know, and I am indeed thankful to have found you at last. I have been looking for you for the past two months—not on my own behalf, but on account of your poor old father—he is longing to see you. He has a nice little home ready for you, and you will be the comfort and solace of his old age.”

The woman sat down on one of the rickety chairs and covered her face with her apron.

“He says to tell you he is just longing to see you again,” went on George gravely. “He said to tell you not to mind whatever the past has been; he will blame you for nothing that has happened. All he wants is his child, the girl who left him many years ago. He loves you as much as he ever did, you can’t think how much he loves you. He begged of me to find you and I am so thankful I have done so. Now, let me write and tell him that I have met you at last, and that you and little Joey are going to him for Christmas.”

The poor woman burst into sobs, and rocked to and fro in her grief.

“How can we go to him, like this?” she wailed; “all in rags, and Joey there so hard to shift from place to place? We’d bring disgrace and shame on his head. Oh! my poor old father, my poor old father!”

“You must let me help you a little. I have known your father for many years and have a great respect for him. I am sure we can get Joey moved without much suffering to the poor lad.”

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"Oh, sir! I can't—I can't go back—I can't face him now, after all the sorrow and shame I've brought on him—I can't go back." She rolled and twisted a ragged corner of her apron in fingers that were trembling with emotion.

"Don't look at it like that, Mrs. Pickers. Your father is longing for a sight of your face. He has forgiven you years ago—in fact he was never angry, only heart-broken. And think of Joey—the poor child will grow strong and well in the country, it is the very best thing in the world for him, and, in fact, his only chance of getting any better. Your father has left Forest Row, he is now at Dane Hill, and there will be no one to know a word about you, or to say anything unkind. Every one knows your father, and every one will be kind to you and Joey. If you will leave everything to me I will arrange it."

After a little delay Mrs. Pickers consented to give Jacobstein & Co. a week's notice, and allowed George to write to old Cutter telling of the success of his quest.

"In the meantime," said George, "we must get you both ready for your journey to Dane Hill. I must bring you that chair, Joey, and we'll see about some crutches for you. Now, I must be off; as it is Saturday evening I will send you in a little supper as I am passing, if you will tell me what you fancy, Joey."

"Sossages and taters," answered the boy eagerly. George took Mrs. Pickers with him and she carried back a large basket laden with sufficient groceries and good things to last the little family a week. He wrote a long letter to Nathaniel, who had the happiness of conveying the good news to Joe Cutter. The old man was intensely pleased and happy, and he poured blessings on the head of George and Nathaniel.

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Dr. Richardson was very interested in Joey's case, and before sending him down to the country had him taken to a specialist of world-wide fame.

"Nothing can be done now. After two years in the country, with good food, and following my directions, I'll see him again," was the verdict.

Joey was duly installed in a rubber-tyred wicker-chair that he could guide himself and that could be adjusted for him to lie at full length when necessary. A quiet suitable outfit had been obtained for Mrs. Pickers. Dr. Richardson insisted on sharing expenses, and they were both overwhelmed with thanks by mother and child. Indeed the happiness of these poor people and their heartfelt expressions of gratitude threw a brighter gleam on the path of their benefactors than had shone for many a day. It is really astonishing what an amount of tangible and indestructible happiness any good and charitable action can bring in its train, provided always the motive of the action is absolutely pure and unselfish.

George put Nancy and her son in the train, and the recollection of their beaming faces remained with him all the day. Nathaniel met them at Dane Hill and drove them in state in the village fly to the nearest approach they could get to Cutter's cottage. Joey had to be carried the rest of the way and then carefully installed in his chair. When Nathaniel came up to London for Christmas he gave a graphic account of the meeting. The old man, he said, had folded the faded and aged woman in his arms and called her, "My lass, my lass, my little Nancy," tears raining down his furrowed old face.

Nathaniel gave George all the news of the Hall. Tom had recently returned from Cambridge for Christmas and had brought a couple of young college friends with him.

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Jim Dudsworth was also at the Hall, and in fact he seemed to be there pretty constantly. There was a rumour that he was in love with Margery, and was paying court to her, and that his suit was favoured by both Sir Alec and Lady Farraday. The girl herself had given no signs of returning the affection; she was looking very pale and ill. Nathaniel saw her in church every Sunday, and she always stopped and said a few words to him, if she could, but she had never mentioned George's name.

"She looks as if she had lost every hope in the world," said Nathaniel, "far too resigned and patient to be in good health. No one who had seen her last summer, rosy and blooming, would recognise her now, she looks so weary and pale. Dr. Legate is quite out of patience with Sir Alec; he has been attending Margery for the past month and there is no improvement. He has advised Sir Alec to take her abroad, but Sir Alec is a pig-headed fool."

Nathaniel had spoken with a purpose. He wanted to rouse George, and he certainly succeeded. The young man was instantly seized with anxiety and dread. The thought that his little Margery was pale and ill was too much for him, and, rightly or wrongly, he determined to see her and speak to her again. That evening at dinner he told Richardson and Nathaniel that he would run down to Dane Hill the following day.

"Being Christmas Eve all the trains will be dreadfully crowded," remarked Nathaniel, "they were bad enough to-day."

"I shall go early, and if I am not back don't worry about me. I am going down on important business, Richardson, and I know you will not mind doing double duty for one day. I know Mother Packer will be glad to see me. She'll look after me and give me a meal. I shall

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return by the 7.15 train, if I can, but it is sure to be late, so I cannot be in time for dinner at any rate."

Dr. Richardson was quite willing that George should take the day off, and said so.

When George got out at Dane Hill Station he found it a wet drizzling day, the sky was a dead leaden colour, and the road half a foot deep in mud.

"Not a chance of seeing Margery in a casual manner," said George to himself. "How in the name of wonder am I going to see her to speak to, even for ten minutes? I must make a way, I won't go away without a word with her, even if I have to ask Sir Alec's permission." He smiled to himself at the idea of Sir Alec listening to his petition. The village fly was conspicuous by its absence, so George had to plod wearily through the rain, with his overcoat dripping, his boots and trousers soaking wet and caked with mud. He turned over many plans as he walked along, but he could not fix on one that would meet the case. When he arrived at his uncle's house, Mrs. Packer was more surprised than pleased to see him. She lit him a roaring fire and then went to see about making him some dinner. George went up to his own room and changed his wet garments, luckily he found he had left a lot of his clothes behind, and then sat in front of the fire, smoking a pipe, and thinking sorrowfully that he might as well be in London as here, for any possible chance he saw of seeing Margery.

Mrs. Packer was a worthy woman in every way, but she deemed it a great hardship that the young master should turn up for Christmas, just as she had arranged to have a quiet holiday of her own. She had invited a few friends in to tea the following afternoon, and saw no means of utilising the drawing-room unless George were out of

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the way. Her niece, Aggie, was a maid at the Hall, and she had heard all the servants' gossip about the love affairs of Margery Farraday, and, needless to say, all her sympathy was given to her young master. As she placed his dinner on the table, she remarked tentatively :—

“I suppose you'll be dining at the Hall, to-night, Master George? And perhaps you'll be spending the day there to-morrow?”

“No, Mrs. Packer, I'm not going to the Hall,” he answered shortly.

“Well, now, that's a pity! I've given Sarah leave to go home for these few days, and how I'm to look after your Christmas dinner, single handed, beats me. There's that Charles, of course; but he's that impudent! and he's no good at helping—more like hindering I should say, with his head only full of hosses and such like.”

Charles was the stable-boy, and it would have been surprising if his head were not full of “horses and such like”. George privately thought that his uncle had been too lenient with Mrs. Packer. She was a good old soul, of course, and they had had her a number of years, still she took many liberties and allowed her tongue great freedom. George made up his mind to speak to Nathaniel about her, and severely express his opinion on her freedom of speech directly he got back to town. A line of ill-temper was showing plainly on George's brows. “Though I will say,” went on Mrs. Packer calmly, having noted the danger signal, “that he does think well of me, and bides what I tell him. He seems to be set on our Aggie, but she won't look at the likes of him. Did you hear, sir, that Aggie is serving at the Hall? Upper housemaid she started at, sir, now she's Miss Margery's private maid, and has to help in the still-room besides.”

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Mrs. Packer's quick eyes noticed that the danger signal had gone from her young master's forehead, and that his old friendly expression had returned.

"I expect Aggie'll step over this afternoon, sir; I asked her to buy me some groceries from the village—I do find it trying to walk so far, and the roads that heavy my skirt gets too mucked for words. Such a sight as my best black was last Sunday, I never did see! Perhaps, sir, when Aggie comes you'd like to ask after Sir Alec and the family, seeing as you're so friendly with them at the Hall?"

The wily woman looked the image of innocent respect, as she stood smoothing her apron.

"Yes, Mrs. Packer, I should like to see Aggie when she comes; I've got a Christmas-box for her," said George, his spirits rising.

Aggie was a demure-looking girl with a fresh country face, and excellent morals. She had been carefully brought up by Mrs. Packer and certainly did her credit. Lady Mary thought a great deal of the girl, with her quiet manners, and sound common-sense. When Aggie arrived that afternoon her aunt told her that Master George wanted to see her as he had a Christmas-box to give her.

"And look here, Aggie, just you tell him all about Miss Margery, for that's all he's come here for, I'll be bound—and if he wants you to give her a letter just you be sensible and obliging."

"Yes, and lose my place if Sir Alec gets a notion! No, thank you, I'm not going to run any risks of that kind; but I can tell him something he'll be glad to hear, I know."

"Well, Aggie," said George, as he saw her smiling face

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at the door, "I hear you've been promoted to lady's-maid at the Hall. How do you like your new duties?"

"I've been lady's-maid to Miss Margery for some time, now, Master George, since October, in fact. I feel quite happy and at home, thank you, and they all treat me so well, just as if I was one of the family."

"And how is every one?" asked George, in a would-be casual voice.

"They are all as well as can be, thank you kindly, only Miss Margery has been having headaches, and she is taking medicine the doctor gave her. She looks white like, because of the headaches."

"They are all in the house this afternoon, I suppose?" he asked carelessly.

"Well, sir, Miss Margery and Miss Cicely are going to drive to Fletching Church with Miss Frizzie—Miss Williams I mean—to help finish decorating for to-morrow, but Lady Farraday and the young gentlemen will be at home, if you want to call, and I think Sir Alec will be in too."

"But is it not too damp for the young ladies to venture out?"

"Well, sir, they've ordered the brougham, and Tomkins is grumbling fit to break his head. He's a cantankerous one is Tomkins—they're leaving the Hall at three, sir, and getting back to tea at five."

It was now past two. George rose with alacrity. "Here is a sovereign, Aggie, to buy a Christmas present for yourself from me, and unless any one particularly asks you, don't mention that you saw me here to-day. I shall be returning to London by the seven thirty train, most probably, and you can tell Mrs. Packer so."

"Thank you kindly, sir, and a merry Christmas, sir,"

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with a demure smile and a respectful little curtsy she withdrew.

It was almost dark when George drove Lena up to Fletching Church. The short winter afternoon had closed in sooner than usual, owing to the thick soft drizzle that was still falling. The lovely old church was in total darkness, except for the candles burning round a group of lady workers near the pulpit and altar.

George stood at the end of the centre isle, waiting his opportunity, his eyes getting accustomed to the gloom of the building. Suddenly he saw Cicely coming towards him, carrying a wreath of holly. In the darkness she could not discern his features, and would have passed him, but that George caught her hand, saying:—

“Cicely, Cicely dear, don’t you know me? I’m Porgee.”

“Gracious!” exclaimed the child, dropping the wreath in her astonishment.

“Don’t make a row,” he added hastily; “but do help me, Cicely dear.”

“What can I do?” she asked, with a miserable sense of backsliding.

“Whisper to Margery—don’t let Frizzie hear you—tell her I’m here, say I’ve come from London to see her—only for five minutes. Do, Cicely, please do. You don’t know what it means to me.”

“But it’s wrong,” said the child, struggling against her feelings. “Mother said ——”

“Yes, I know, dear, but I will take the wrong on my conscience. Only ask Margery to come to the side porch! Please, Cicely—like a dear.”

Cicely’s affections proving stronger than her morals, she nodded, and going up to Margery, whispered in her ear:—

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"Go to the porch, the side porch—Porgee's here—he wants to see you."

"What is the matter?" asked Frizzie, noticing Margery's white face in the flickering candle-light.

"Nothing," answered Cicely cheerfully. Her feet being once on the downward path, she continued mendaciously: "I can't fix up the font properly, the wreath looks all skew-wiffy. Margery dear, go and finish it for me, you don't need a candle, it's quite light near the font."

Margery went with beating heart and trembling steps towards the side porch, and before she could see George she was drawn into his arms. With a little sob of happiness, she returned his kisses again and again. The weight of sorrow that had lain so heavily on her for the past months seemed to roll away, and under his kisses, with his arms clasping her close to his heart, she almost forgot what she had suffered. The porch had old-fashioned stone seats, and sitting on one of these, George drew her on to his knee.

"Oh, George," she said, catching her breath as memory returned with a stab of pain, "Oh, George! how could you be so cruel? How could you make love to that woman when you were engaged to me?"

"What have they been telling you—darling? What lies have they poisoned your mind with?" he asked, his temper rising against whoever dared to try and undermine her sweet faith in him.

"I heard—about six weeks ago—that you were always going about with a Mrs. Reubens—that you—you loved her—and she came to your house often and took you for drives in her motor-car—and that you have a large photo of her in your room—and that you loved her when for lived with her in America, before you ever said you cared for me."

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George could have cursed in his rage.

"Who has told you all this?" he asked.

"Oh! heaps of people, every one. Tom saw her photo in your room, and Jim Dudsworth saw you going about with her in London, and father told me you had lived with the Reubens in America, and he hinted that you were in love with her."

George felt her slight form quiver in his arms, and his heart sickened with dread when he realised how thin she had grown.

"Damn the cowardly brutes," he muttered between his teeth.

"Don't swear, George, it won't do any good. But the worst is, in spite of everything I hear, I love you just the same. It doesn't seem to make the least difference what they tell me about you, and now you are kissing me and holding me tight, I don't care, even if it's all true. Only when you go away it will begin to hurt me again."

"Darling, darling," and he covered the soft lips with kisses, "darling love, God bless you. It is like you, Margery, to be so loyal and true—my own little love. Now I will tell you everything—and when I go away, believe me, sweetheart, you need never have a doubt of me again. Part of the story is true—I did love Mrs. Reubens, in an infatuated manner while I was in America, but from the day I returned home, and saw your sweet face that feeling died. I love you and you only—surely you know that? Could I kiss you like this if I did not love you to distraction?" he asked.

"I don't know, I don't think so. When you kiss me, I am certain that you love me, George."

"You may be, indeed, my little one. Well, about Mrs. Reubens—I saw her in London and she came to consult

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me as a doctor and I drove with her ; not a thought disloyal to you has been in my mind, darling. Poor Mrs. Reubens is now a widow, and she was in trouble—about her husband—when she came to see me. She has gone away from London, I expect for good. Tell me, Margery darling, are you satisfied? Do you still doubt me?”

“So Mrs. Reubens is a widow? She is free—don’t you want to marry her instead of me, George? She is beautiful, she is rich.”

“God forbid,” said George, as he crushed her in his arms ; “I only want you, and I would rather wait all my life for you than marry any one else—however rich or beautiful she might be.”

“Take me away with you, George ; take me away with you and marry me,” she suddenly pleaded, putting both her arms round his neck. “At first I thought I could not be happy if Daddy and Mother were angry, but now I know much better. I can’t be happy without you, George, I long for you all day. I did not guess I should ever feel like this. I don’t even feel ashamed of all I am saying. Take me away with you, George.”

For a few minutes George could not answer her, he only held her closer to him as if defying fate itself to separate them. He went over in his mind the possibility of taking her at her word, but better thoughts prevailed, for he knew that no good would follow by disobeying her parents in spite of her innocent pleading.

“My love, my darling, I only wish I dare. I must not Margery, I could never look your father and mother in the face again.” Then he remembered a little case he had brought with him in the hope of seeing Margery, and giving it to her. “Margery, this is a little locket I brought you as a Christmas present—wear it, darling, for my sake.”

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"Put it on for me, and I won't take it off," she whispered. He clasped the delicate gold chain round her neck and she felt for the locket and kissed it. It was too dark to see anything, even each other's faces.

"You are so thin, Margery," he said anxiously, "you are not ill, are you?"

"No, not ill, only run down, Dr. Legate says."

Cicely's voice and crisp firm steps startled them.

"Frizzie wants to know when the font will be finished; she wants to go home, she's dying for her tea. She was coming in search of you herself, but I managed to turn her off the track."

"Good-bye, George; when shall I see you again?" asked Margery, putting her hands in his.

"I'll take my chance and run down again for a day soon. I will contrive to see you, somehow. Good-bye, Margery," he caught her in his arms again and kissed her passionately.

"Good-bye, Cicely; you're a brick of a girl. Look after Margery she seems a bit out of sorts."

"Ta-ta, Porgee; come on, Marnie; Frizzie will be here in a jif if you don't hurry." Slipping her hand into her sister's Cicely conducted Margery back to the body of the church, where Frizzie, thirsty and impatient, was waiting for them.

CHAPTER XI

SIR ALEC FARRADAY believed in keeping what is known as an old-fashioned Christmas—he delighted in Christmas trees, puddings, roast beef, cakes and crackers.

The Farraday children had always found it a time of unalloyed pleasure. The day itself he called the children's day, and every one in the house devoted themselves to making the little ones happy.

After church, which every member of the family was obliged to attend, they had a big mid-day dinner with all the children round them ; during the afternoon they played snap-dragon and other games till tea-time ; during the evening Sir Alec always gave his servants and their friends a big supper, followed by dancing. On Boxing Day he gave a monster Christmas tree to all the village children, tea being supplied to them as well as their parents ; the day following he gave a splendid dinner to all his tenants and their families.

These lavish hospitalities endeared him to the tenantry and villagers, and he was a most popular landlord. The poor and the sick were looked after, and even personally tended by Lady Mary and her daughters. That Christmas morning when Margery opened her eyes she flew to her looking-glass to see how George's locket looked by daylight. She opened the top of her dainty nightdress, the better to admire the effect of the trinket lying round her white throat. The locket was a little heart studied

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with pearls and M in turquoises in the centre, she touched a spring and George's face smiled at her from the inside. She curled herself up in bed and covered the photo with kisses, gazing at it with a happy smile on her face. The door burst open and Tots threw herself upon Margery, showering the contents of her toy-laden arms over the quilt.

"Melly Kismis! melly Kismis!" cooed the child, as she hugged her sister. "See all Tots' booful, booful fings. What did Father Kismis bring you?" Then her eyes fell on the open locket that Margery had not had time to close. "Father Kismis bringed you Porgee's picture? Let Tots see—Tots loves Porgee," this last argument was irresistible. Margery showed her the locket and the two heads were bent together over George's face. They made a study that would have delighted an artist. The baby-girl was kneeling on the bed, clad in a pale blue dressing gown, her cheeks flushed with all the excitement and pleasure of the morning, her tangled curls touching and mingling with the soft clouds of golden hair that lay over Margery's shoulders and bosom. The elder girl had thrown her arm tenderly and protectingly round her little sister. The quilt was strewn with gay toys and quaint gollywogs.

"Now, Tots darling, do something for Marnie—don't tell any one that Father Kismis gave this locket. I want to keep it a secret—just for you and me."

Tots solemnly nodded her head, she loved secrets, but she could never keep one.

"Tots won't tell *no-one*," she cried emphatically.

"Mind you don't, darling, else perhaps Father Kismis will come and take it away again."

"Tots won't tell," repeated the baby, as she gathered

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up her treasures and prepared to depart. "Tots must go and see Mummie and Daddie, and say Melly Kismis."

She threw her arms round her sister's neck and Margery held her close and kissed her. She was devotedly attached to the child, and in after years she was always glad to remember how much Tots had loved her.

Sir Alec was considerably relieved when he saw how much better Margery looked that morning. Her pale face had been a silent and continual reproach to him, and his conscience had smarted a little whenever he had caught the wistful expression in her eyes.

Lady Mary had never expressed any opinion on Margery's love affair, and that, as Sir Alec well knew, was an ominous fact. Her sympathy was entirely with George, but as Sir Alec had taken up the matter and treated it with such unwonted severity, and, so far as she knew, injustice, she made no remark and expressed no opinion.

This little intangible rift was the first in their happy married life, and Sir Alec had chafed privately over his wife's strange silence. He wanted to justify his actions to his own conscience, for he was by nature a scrupulously conscientious man, and he often tried to put his wife in a corner and force her to express some opinion, but her invariable answer was:—

"You have acted as you thought best, dear. There is nothing more to be said on the subject."

That Christmas morning in church Sir Alec noticed that Margery was looking more like her old self again, and he rejoiced in consequence. He thought that she had at last got over her silly feelings for George, and he congratulated himself on his perspicuity in sending her penniless lover away, and in having successfully overcome his daughter's youthful fancy for an undesirable man.

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"If she will only take a fancy to Jim Dudsworth," he soliloquised, "I shall be delighted, and everything will end satisfactorily."

So engrossed was he by these pleasant thoughts that he omitted his usual prayers of thanksgiving to his Creator; during the sermon he slept peacefully, and when the service was ended and the people pouring out of church, he became aware that he had not said a single prayer; but his spirit was so elated by his joyful imaginations that even the remembrance of his neglected duty did not disturb him. Dinner was a gay function. The roast-beef and turkey and blazing plum-pudding had been replaced by desert, and the servants had withdrawn.

Tom took Jim Dudsworth and his young college friends off to the billiard-room, Sir Alec flung himself into an easy-chair, lighting his cigar, he watched his children as they pulled crackers, and he felt a complacent pride as he noticed the uncommon good looks of each member of his family.

Little Tots was dancing round the table, a weird paper-cap on her head, her pinafore full of sweets and bonbons.

"Come here, love," said Sir Alec, "and sit on Daddy's knee, and tell Daddy a fairy story."

"Don't 'member no flarly stories," she said, gravely sucking a caramel.

"Do try, Tots; tell Daddy a nice fairy story, the same as Marnie reads to you out of your book."

This remark recalled to Tots the episode of the morning.

"I tan't 'member no stories, but," mysteriously lowering her voice, and putting her sticky lips to his ear, "Tots knows a secret, a big, big, secret,—shall Tots tell Daddy?"

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"Yes, love, of course," and Sir Alec stroked her glossy curls and smiled at her earnest little face.

"Father Kismis gived Marnie a booful locket and it's got Porgee's picture inside; Tots kissed Porgee's face and so did Marnie."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Sir Alec shortly. "What silly story is this?"

Tots looked up in injured surprise.

"I telled Daddy your secret, Marnie, and he says it's a silly story—didn't Father Kismis give you a locket with Porgee's picture inside? Didn't you show it to Tots? And we kissed it in bed this morning," she added triumphantly.

Dead silence had fallen on the room, and Tots's clear treble was distinctly heard—they all turned and looked at Margery.

The poor girl had blushed a vivid carmine, and then sat growing whiter and whiter, until even her lips seemed drained of colour.

"What is this, Margery? What locket is this Tots speaks of?"

Sir Alec's voice had never sounded so cold and stern before.

With trembling fingers Margery undid the neck of her pretty velvet dress. She drew out a little locket set with pearls and torquoises.

"Where did you get it? Who gave it to you?" demanded Sir Alec fiercely.

Margery's trembling lips refused to answer.

"Give it to me," thundered her father, standing up abruptly and holding out his hand for it.

Margery lifted her eyes beseechingly to his face, but he only repeated his demand in a sterner voice. She unclasped

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the chain and slipped off the locket, refastened the chain round her neck and handed the offending trinket to Sir Alec.

He looked at it in wonder—how on earth could the girl get it without his knowledge? Perhaps it was a storm in a tea-cup, and George had not given it to her? He pressed the spring and the young man's face smiled up at him.

"There," exclaimed Tots triumphantly, "Tots told you Porgee's picture was inside—didn't Tots?" Sir Alec pushed the baby roughly out of his way.

"Damn that man, with his impertinence," he muttered, and flinging the locket on the floor he ground it down with his heel and stamped it out of all shape.

Tots looked in bewilderment from her father to Margery. The tragic look of horror in her sister's face was a revelation to her baby heart.

"You bad wicked Daddy!" she cried, stamping her foot at him. With outstretched arms she ran to Margery in a passion of remorseful tears.

"Tots didn't *mean* to do it, Marnie; Tots didn't *mean* to tell no one," and she clung sobbing to her neck. Margery hid her white face in Tots's curls, and took the child on her knee.

Sir Alec saw a look of amazed reproach in his wife's eyes that acted on his temper like the sting of a lash.

Little Alec happened to be playing with some toy-soldiers at the edge of the table, and was directly in his father's way. Giving the boy a sounding box on the ears, Sir Alec flung himself out of the room to work off his temper out of doors.

Lady Mary comforted the indignant and smarting Alec, and then went and put her arm kindly round Margery's shoulders.

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"Come upstairs, dearest, and tell me all about it." She poured out a glass of port-wine and forced it between the girl's pale lips, and then, with her arm still round her, drew her out of the room. In the sanctuary of her own little chamber Margery opened her heart to her mother and told her everything. Lady Mary did her best to comfort her child, without being a traitor to her husband. After she had listened to a declaration of undying love for George, Lady Mary made Margery lie down and covered her up. "Rest, now, darling, till tea-time. You look worn-out. If you like I will send your tea upstairs to you."

A timid tap at the door startled them; Tots came in crumpled and damp with much crying, her little face woe-begone.

"Tots bringed it up for you—Tots is welly welly sorry," she pleaded, holding out a shapeless mass that had once been a gold locket.

"It's all right, I know you did not mean it. Don't cry pet," and Margery wiped away the baby's tears. Lady Mary never forgot how sweetly and generously Margery behaved over the loss of her first love gift. Not a word of reproach or anger crossed the girl's lips, not a hint that she thought her father had acted sternly or unjustly.

Margery had always loved and trusted her father, and she was loyal to him even in the midst of her disappointment and natural vexation.

The festivities that evening seemed to lack some of their accustomed gaiety. Margery was absent, she had remained in bed, pleading a bad headache as her excuse. Lady Mary seemed depressed and worried, while Sir Alec was in a decidedly grumpy temper. After going round among her servants and their guests, saying a few kindly words here and there, and seeing that dancing was in full

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swing, Lady Mary retired. She was troubled and perplexed and wanted a quiet time in which to think things over. When Sir Alec came to bed two hours later he found his wife seated in an easy-chair before the fire in her dressing-room. Her still luxuriant hair hung in a plait down her back, and in her dainty dressing-gown she looked wonderfully sweet and young. Sir Alec's love for his wife was very true and deep, and his heart throbbed with apprehension.

"What is the matter? What has happened, Mary darling?" he asked putting his arm around her.

"Come and sit down, Alec, I want to talk to you. I could not sleep, so sat up and waited for you. What has been the matter with you lately? Are you worried about anything?"

Sir Alec immediately guessed what his wife was going to say and he mentally braced himself up for the encounter, trying to harden his heart as he did so.

"Now, Mary, my love, what is it you want me to tell you?" he asked with fictitious cheerfulness.

"Why are you making Marnie so unhappy?" asked his wife, and he saw the glitter of unshed tears in her eyes.

Sir Alec stirred uneasily, this was not quite what he had bargained for.

"I have never asked you any questions, Alec dear; I have never interfered in any way, but I really cannot understand your attitude in this matter. We have been so happy together, dear," and she laid her soft hand on his, "we have lived for each other and our children—can you wonder that this atmosphere of married love and happiness should have produced its result in our child? Frankly speaking, Alec, I always thought you a most unworldly man, and loved you all the more because you found all your

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happiness in me, and your home. You have never shown any desire for wealth or honours—why should you, at this time of your life, suddenly change all our ideas of you, and what we have always expected of you?”

Sir Alec twisted uneasily in his chair. He wished he might have a cigar, he longed to walk about, and above all he wanted to end the interview.

“I have not changed, Mary dear, believe me. I am supremely happy and contented and wish for myself nothing more than I possess. But, as regards Margery, I do not think George Targett a proper husband for her. He is quite poor, a nobody in particular, and has been hanging about this Mrs. Reubens in London. Certainly you can't consider him a good match for our Margery?”

“It is all nonsense about Mrs. Reubens—George loves Margery, I am certain of it. Granted he is not very well off—he will get on, and Nathaniel has said, over and over again, that George is his heir. They will be quite comfortable, and Dane Hill Lodge is not so very far away.”

“Dudsworth House is also not very far away. In spite of all you can say, Mary, I still repeat, I do not consider George Targett a suitable husband for Margery.”

“Are you being swayed by love for your child, or ambition for her?”

“Both, I think, my dear. You must remember that your father was Lord Mowbray—Margery is very highly connected on your side, and then, of course, she is a Farraday of Farraday Hall—the Farradays go back to Henry the Second——”

“My dear Alec, I did not ask for your genealogical tree. You know perfectly well that all the Mowbrays are as poor as church mice, so, as they can do nothing for Margery, why study them in the matter? You have never spoken

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like this before, and do you know, Alec, it sounds almost—almost—well, vulgar, to say the least of it, expressing one's social position in that manner. Any one not knowing you and hearing you speak would think you had not been born to it and used to it all your life." Her innocent words hit Sir Alec hard. He sat silent and stared into the fire.

"For my own part," went on Lady Mary gently, "I love George Targett. He is a fine young man and quite sufficiently well born to be a gentleman. I know his poverty is a drawback, but we are very well off, Alec; we have never lived up to the full extent of our income—why not allow the child £500 a year? Happiness is before wealth and position; and think how happy we have been together, Alec dear—love is *everything* in married life."

Sir Alec got up and kissed his wife tenderly.

"My darling girl, you are the sweetest woman in the world, and I should be an ungrateful beast if I did not adore you. I will think over this matter of Marnie's—I can't say I like the idea of her marrying a nobody—and a poor nobody at that! Besides, she is very young, how can she know her own mind? She will outgrow this love affair I am certain."

"No, Alec, you are wrong there. When Margery loves, she loves for ever. She is very deeply attached to George. I always gussed that he loved her, and to-night the child showed me a little bit of her heart. They are both in earnest; you had better give in, Alec, before they take the law into their own hands and run away."

Sir Alec laughed heartily as he took off his dressing-gown and prepared to get into bed.

"The young man has bewitched you, as well as Marnie! No, Mary, my love, they won't take the law into their

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hands, if I can help it. Later on, we'll see how things go. Jim Dudsworth is also in love with the girl—who knows what may happen?"

"I dislike Jim. He is a hateful young man. I shall not encourage him, at any rate. If you will only be guided by me, you will recall George and sanction the engagement. You are acting unjustly, Alec, and I feel as if misfortune will fall on us if you persevere in this attitude."

"Leave the affair in my hands, Mary, and let me act as I think best. I love my child just as much as you do, and my one desire is to do my best for all my children. Don't worry, my dear, it will all come right; we will go away for a change this spring, and on our return I promise I will think this matter over again."

Sir Alec was soon sound asleep, but his wife tossed about uneasily until nearly morning. She had a strange, heavy sense of impending sorrow which she could not shake off.

Her calm gentle nature was overshadowed by some melancholy forebodings which she could not account for, as she was usually the least imaginative and superstitious of women. It was only after the first faint light of dawn came into the room, that she dropped off into an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER XII

MARGERY'S coolness and indifference stirred Jim Duds-worth's mild fancy into a fairly good imitation of love. He had started paying her attentions with the idea of "doing Targett in the eye," and when he heard that the young man had been ignominiously dismissed, and sent away to London, his spirits rose to great heights. Tom had given him the news, and unconsciously conveyed it in such a manner that he believed the girl herself had refused Targett, and Jim thought that now, as the coast was clear, he would make the running while he had the chance. Margery was in blissful ignorance of his real feelings.

Soon after Christmas, Jim considered the time was ripe for him to propose. "No use keeping the girl on tenter-hooks. She must be waiting to see which way the wind blows before she gives me too much encouragement. I like her style—keeping back the pace—no gush—no tommy-rot—she's a thorough-bred all over. I'd better pop the question before I go away, and tie her down for a year or two—she wants time to fill out a bit, she's too skinny just now. And what's the good of getting married so soon? I'll fix things up, and go away and enjoy myself, eh?" and Jim gave himself a metaphorical wink at his own astuteness. That Margery might refuse him never crossed his mind. He had received such open advances from girls of all kind that he considered the Hon.

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James Dudsworth was quite a prize in the matrimonial market. He knew his own value very well, and privately thought Margery Farraday a cut beneath him, especially as she had no particular style and beauty to make her a catch. However, being in some ways a cautious young man, he thought Margery was a safe investment for his money and position. She was a quiet, good girl, he considered, who would not expect too much, and who could be trusted not to kick over the traces. Being somewhat immoral himself he admired virtue very much in the abstract, though he was so constituted that he could not be true to one woman for any length of time. With Margery he thought he would be safe, she would be too innocent at first, and too proud afterwards, to notice his little lapses from virtue. A few days after the New Year he made Margery a formal offer of his heart and hand. Tom was returning to Cambridge in a few days, and when he left Jim was off for a round of visits. He placed himself and his offer in as good and advantageous a light as possible only stipulating for two years' liberty before—as he elegantly expressed it—they settled down to double harness.

"Oh no! no!" cried Margery, startled into a sudden cry of horror; "you don't understand—I can't marry you, I don't love you."

"Well, girls never do love a chap till he proposes to them," replied Jim coolly, hitting at his gaitered legs with a whip.

"I don't love you at all," pleaded the girl; "I never shall love you, I cannot marry you."

"Hallo! That's pretty cool after all the encouragement you've given me!"

"I never meant to encourage you, I had no idea you—

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you wanted to marry me. I'm very sorry, Mr. Dudsworth."

Wounded vanity caused a dull red flush to mount to Jim's face.

"And why won't you marry me? What's wrong with me?" he asked in an ominously sarcastic voice.

"Don't ask me, please don't ask me, Mr. Dudsworth; I can't love you, and I can't marry you."

The girl looked agitated and her voice shook.

"I suppose there's some other Johnny in the field—eh? I wonder what your father will have to say to all this?" Jim's anger was by this time, at a white heat.

"Daddy will not force me to marry any one," replied Margery coldly, regaining her composure. "I am sorry I cannot marry you, Mr. Dudsworth—please believe me, I'm very sorry."

Her coldness fanned his feelings to a flame of passion.

"Look here," he cried, roughly catching her hands, "I'm not going to take 'no' from a chit of a girl like you. Do you hear me? I mean to have you, willing or unwilling and when I've got you, my lady, I'll force you to do what I like. I'll teach you what love is." His loud voice, his excited manner, and the glare of unbridled passion in his eyes, terrified Margery beyond words, she tried to draw away her hands.

"Oh, don't," she murmured, not knowing what she really feared.

Her terror and distress were the last straw. He drew her forcibly towards him, clasped her in his arms and kissed her passionately. For a moment she was too startled to resist, then, with a cry of rage, she struggled in his embrace like a trapped wild animal. His arms were strong with continual riding, he held her as in a vice, and

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his hot kisses fell savagely on her mouth, her eyes, her neck. Each seemed more loathsome than the last, the girl felt maddened, they seemed to sear her body like hot steel.

"You beast, you brute," she said between her teeth, and getting her hand free she beat her clenched fist in his face with all her might.

"You little she-cat!" he almost laughed at her wild struggles, he had had his fill of kisses and was satisfied. "I'll teach you what love is—you shall marry me, see if you don't." He caught her hands to her side, pressed his lips once more on hers, straining her to him, then flung her off and walked out of the room.

Margery fell, sobbing and faint, upon a sofa.

Jim poured his story into Sir Alec's ears, glossing over his behaviour as much as possible. To his astonishment Sir Alec would give him no definite encouragement.

"I cannot force my daughter's affections. If she will not marry you, I can't make her," he replied; "but take my advice, my dear Jim, and leave the girl alone for the present. She is too young to know her own mind, she is quite a baby yet. There is no one I would prefer for a son-in-law," went on Sir Alec suavely, "but as I say, I cannot force her affections. We are all going away for a few months this Spring, and on our return, if you are still of the same mind, come back and see what she has to say to you."

"In the meantime," grumbled Jim, "some other chap will be spooning her."

"I think not," replied Sir Alec coldly. "And, in any case, I will not promise you anything definitely. Don't give up hope; remember you have my good wishes, and

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I will do my best for you. She is such a child, there is plenty of time before you. Take my advice and leave her alone."

It was a case of Hobson's choice. Jim packed up, and left Farraday Hall that afternoon, to Margery's unbounded relief. Soon after, Tom and his friends returned to college, and the house settled down into its usual quiet routine. Margery told her mother of Jim's ungentlemanly conduct, and Lady Mary privately resolved that the young man should not have the chance of insulting her daughter again.

When Sir Alec met Nathaniel Targett on business he treated him with a haughty coldness that was very galling to the old man. There were no more friendly games of bridge up at the Hall, and even Lady Mary thought it wiser to bow and pass on when she saw Nathaniel. Margery was the only one who invariably came up to him after church, and bravely asked after George, often sending him privately a little message, and receiving in return some loving remembrances from her absent lover.

February came in with a week of severe frost, the Dane Hill lake was frozen and the Farraday mere. The children had five days' continued skating, and enjoyed life immensely. Margery began to pick up and to look bonnier for the brisk exhilarating exercise. One morning Frizzie took Cicely, Jackie and Tots to the mere, for Cicely to skate while the younger children made slides. Sir Alec noticed that a thaw had set in, and sent a message saying that the ice would not bear. Cicely reluctantly took off her skates, and they started walking back to the house. When they were nearly at the Hall, they missed Tots. Margery and Alec had come out to meet

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them and she was the first to notice that the child was absent.

"Jackie—where is Tots?" asked Frizzie in sudden alarm.

"Tots ran away—she said she was going back to the slide we made near the duck house," grumbled the boy, who was in a bad humour from being deprived of his pleasure.

Margery and Cicely set off at a quick run. The duck house was on the east side of the mere, and a spring near the edge prevented it from ever freezing very solidly there. It was luckily shallow, and they did not apprehend any grave danger. As they came near, Tots' frantic voice reached them, treble and shrill; "Tots tumbled—Tots tumbled in—"

Rushing to her they found her up to her arms in the water, beating the ice round her with ineffectual hands; as soon as she saw them, she gasped:—

"Marnie—Marnie—Tots is *so* cold."

Not a soul was in sight, both girls waded through the broken ice up to their knees in water. Margery lifted Tots out, and taking off her thick winter coat, wrapped the child in it. With help from Cicely she got safely on the bank again, with the dripping child in her arms. Their teeth were chattering and they were all chilled to the bone by the icy water. Frizzie and Alec came running up with Tomkins behind them, Jackie having run back to the Hall to call Sir Alec.

Putting Tots into Tomkin's arms, Margery panted: "Run—run—she was in the water some time—see, her lips are blue—run, Tomkins, and get her attended to, but don't frighten Mother."

The worthy man was stout, and had a great opinion

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of his own dignity, but on this occasion he threw appearances to the wind, and ran as fast as he could to the Hall, with Tots in his arms.

That evening Dr. Legate had his hands full. Tots was raving and delirious with fever, attendant on a severe chill, and Margery lay white and silent with a sore-throat and aching limbs. Even healthy little Cicely came in for her share of suffering, being kept in bed with a bad cold. By morning Sir Alec realised that he had never fully valued the benefits of health. Neither he nor Lady Mary closed their eyes that night, and when morning dawned it brought very little comfort. Margery was in a low condition and considerably run-down, so her sore throat was serious and her cold was developing into influenza. Little Tots lay dangerously ill, babbling nonsense, with a very high temperature. The following day two trained nurses came down from London and took possession of the nursery, the family nurse old Mrs. Purvis, being sent with Jackie to another part of the house. Margery was ill, though not in danger, but Dr. Legate shook his head ominously over Tots. She was conscious only by fits and starts, and Lady Mary sat in a low chair beside the little white bed, anxiously watching the changes on the flushed baby face. Another long, weary day passed, and when Dr. Legate called in the evening, heard the nurses' report, and saw the condition of his little patient, his kind heart sank at the thought of the tidings he had to give the parents. He had brought the child into the world and his hand shook as he smoothed the damp, limp curls. He put his arm into Sir Alec's and led him downstairs. He cleared his throat and then said brokenly—

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"Miss Margery is progressing slowly, Sir Alec; in a week she ought to be over the worst of it, but all anxiety, all bad news must be kept from her——"

"Why, of course," interrupted Sir Alec fretfully, his nerves and his temper were wearing very thin during these days of strain. "What bad news should the girl hear? Nothing will be allowed to vex or worry her. But what of Tots? Do you find Baby better?"

"My dear Sir Alec, I am heart-broken at my task—but I fear—I fear there is very little hope for Baby Tots."

"Very little hope?" Sir Alec's ruddy face turned grey.

"If you wish it, I will wire to London for a children's specialist, Dr. Stephenson; I do not see that there is any harm in getting all the advice we can, and you will feel afterwards that we have done all in our power for the child."

"Yes, Legate, of course—wire immediately—whoever you think, the best—two or three, if necessary—have a consultation," the broken words came from lips almost white.

Dr. Legate led him into the dining-room and poured him out a glass of brandy, adding some seltzer from the syphon on the sideboard. Sir Alec drank it mechanically.

"Remember, Sir Alec, we will all do our best, but life and death are in God's hands. Pull yourself together and bear it bravely. Lady Mary will need all your strength to lean on. Good-evening, I must rush away and get my wire off to Stephenson, or we shall never catch him."

Sir Alec sat, dazed and stupefied, in his favourite chair before the dining-room fire, which had burnt low; the

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room was in darkness but for the fitful gleam of the flames. He bent his head on his hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Very little hope!" the words kept ringing in his ears; "very little hope for Baby Tots."

His heart was wrung and twisted with the agony of his thoughts. Tots, merry, mischievous, spoilt little Tots, how could "very little hope" apply to her? Only the other day she had danced round this very table and sat on his knee, and—here a shiver of remembrance passed over him,—he had pushed her off. "Oh, not Tots, not Tots," his heart moaned within him, "not my baby—not Tots." The slow and unaccustomed tears of manhood gathered and rolled down his face.

For a long hour he sat there, while Sorrow and Despair, twin sisters of Misery, sat on either side, and did not cease to pour their cruel whispers into his ears.

Then he roused himself from his torpor and thought of his wife, and, cold evening though it was, a sweat of fear broke out on his brow. "How would she bear it? She, whose heart and life were bound up in her children? She, whose whole existence had been so sheltered from every touch of sorrow and care?"

The thought of his wife was salutary. Sir Alec wiped his face, and pulling himself together he went upstairs to the nursery. The nurses were changing the poultices that encased the little body, and moaning cries were coming from the baby lips. Lady Mary was in her chair, gently soothing the restless hands and head.

"What did the doctor say?" she asked, despair looking at him out of her eyes.

"He has wired for another doctor from London," replied Sir Alec slowly and heavily.

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With a cry of, "My God! My God!" Lady Mary clutched the sheets with her hands, and buried her face in the pillow beside Tots. Sir Alec stood by, looking on, and realising how helpless he was.

"Come, ma'am, don't give way; while there's life there's hope. See, the little one is easier for a bit, she will doze now for an hour or so; you had better get a rest. I will call you, if she asks for you." The kindly nurse drew Lady Mary away, and Sir Alec, putting his arm round his wife, led her to her own room.

Dr. Stephenson arrived with Dr. Legate the following morning. He quickly saw that there was no hope for the child. The celebrated specialist was a great big burly man, with a shock of white hair, fierce white eye-brows with the kindest and keenest of eyes beneath them. Tots had struggled back into consciousness.

"Tots is welly sick," she said in acute self-pity.

The big man sat down on her little bed and raised her gently. "Is there nothing you would like, Baby?" he asked. The little underlip quivered.

"Tots wants to det better," she said.

"You will soon be quite, quite well," answered the doctor in a cheerful voice. The weary little head fell on one side, and she dropped off in a dead sleep. He settled her in the bed, looked at the various medicines, spoke to the nurses, and walked out of the room. The mother and father followed him with Dr. Legate.

"I am afraid I can add nothing to what your own doctor has told you. Everything that can be done has been done. I have always believed that the sharpest and quickest pain is easier to bear than prolonged suspense. Your little one has not long to live. She will probably be conscious just before the end."

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He was turning to go, when Lady Mary's face arrested him.

"God's power is very great, my dear lady," he said kindly, "He has power to comfort even *your* sorrow, and none but God Himself can estimate what that is. But He will comfort you—trust Him."

All that day Tots lay unconscious, moaning from time to time. Lady Mary sat by her bed, neither moving nor speaking, but every now and then softly rubbing the little hands and face. As night came on Tots fell into a deep, heavy slumber; she awoke about midnight, conscious; the fever had left her, and she was wet with perspiration, her little limbs clammy and cold. The nurse warned Sir Alec, and he came and stood behind his wife.

Tots looked at her mother with pitying eyes.

"Why are you kying, Mummie?"

"I'm not crying!" said Lady Mary, bravely smiling at her.

"Tots is better," said the child drowsily.

"Of course, darling, Tots is much better," said the mother, trying to control her trembling lips.

Something in Lady Mary's face aroused the tender pitying instinct of the baby's heart.

"Tots loves Mummie, Tots' dear Mummie," she murmured feebly, trying to hold out her arms. Lady Mary gathered her to her breast, and in those few moments the sharpness of Death's sting passed away.

"Sing—sing 'Gleen hill, far away,'" said the child, her eyes closed.

Her mother sang the hymn through in a voice that only faltered now and then. At the end, Tots was fast drifting away, but she lifted her heavy eyelids and murmured, "Dear Mummie".

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They were her last words. A few minutes later the little white soul of Tots went back to the Heaven it had been sent from.

Every one at the Hall felt the blow keenly. The servants crept about with hushed tread and red eyelids, the villagers and tenants sent numberless offerings of flowers. Lady Mary still sat in dumb despair beside the little bed on which lay the mortal remains of Tots, every now and again stroking the waxen cheek with her forefinger, and softly whispering:—

“Baby—Tots—darling—wake up”.

Her husband knelt sobbing beside the bed, but Lady Mary sat unmoved, and never turned her head or spoke to any one but the dead child.

Dr. Legate came and drawing Sir Alec out of the room told him that his wife must be aroused at any cost, as her brain was numbed and temporarily unhinged by the shock she had undergone. She was under the delusion that Tots was asleep, and would soon wake again.

They all tried to rouse the poor dazed woman, but she shook their hands off, and would not listen to them. It was Margery who broke the strain. She heard the bad news suddenly from one of the servants, and rushed bare-foot, in her nightdress, to the nursery, and threw herself sobbing upon her mother's lap.

“Hush, darling, hush! you'll wake Tots.”

“Oh Mother!” shrieked the girl, “she's dead! She's dead, she'll never wake again.”

Her violent sobs aroused Lady Mary. She gave a startled glance around the room and her brain went back to its normal condition. She saw the delicate girl at her feet, clad only in her thin nightdress and hysterical with

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grief—all her Motherhood awoke in her child's behalf. She gathered Margery to her bosom, and telling the nurses to wrap a warm garment around her, she gradually soothed and comforted the sobbing girl, and weeping together they took their last farewell of Tots.

CHAPTER XIII

NATHANIEL TARGETT sat and looked with complacent eyes at his trimly kept garden. The summer had come again, and his flowers were gorgeous; the borders flaming with every varied hue, and the laid-out beds graduating in all shades of colour. He had his wicker chair under a tree, and with his favourite pipe in his mouth he sat admiring old Joe Cutter's handiwork.

"He said he'd make it a greater success than ever—and he is right. I don't remember the year when the garden looked better. Good old Joe! It repays him for all his trouble," thought the owner of the garden.

The afternoon sun cast long slanting shadows over the evenly cut lawns. Peace brooded over the scene as a dove over her nest. Being alone, Nathaniel yielded to the soothing, drowsy influence of the hour, and laying his pipe tenderly on the grass beside his chair he clasped his hands over his stomach, and closed his eyes. His head gradually sank to one side, his mouth opened slightly and the sound of regular gentle snores was distinctly audible.

Mrs. Packer crossed the lawn, and seeing that her master was dozing, she gave a discreet cough, and, as that had no effect, she gave a smart tug to his sleeve.

Nathaniel started up and looked at Mrs. Packer in severe surprise.

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"I've not been asleep," he remarked shortly.

"Oh, no, sir," respectfully answered the worthy lady, "and I beg your pardon for disturbing you, but there's two gentlemen a-asking to see you. Mr. Grimson said to tell you they're waiting in your private office."

"Two gentlemen? On business I suppose? Well, tell Grimson to see them, and tell them to leave instructions with him. It's nearly five now, and I'm not going to see any one else to-day."

He felt distinctly aggrieved at being disturbed by business matters during this lovely summer afternoon.

"Mrs. Packer," he called after her retreating form, "I'll be glad if you can serve tea as soon as possible."

With a faintly audible, "Yes, sir," Mrs. Packer disappeared into the house.

In about ten minutes she returned, bewilderment with a fair mixture of curiosity written on her expressive features. She handed Nathaniel a piece of his own office paper.

"The gentlemen would not tell Mr. Grimson their business, sir; but they left this paper, and said to tell you that they would call to see you to-morrow morning at ten o'clock."

On the paper was written in an unformed hand:—

"Mr. Thomas Farraday and Mr. James Mactarvish; we call to see you to-morrow at ten".

Nathaniel stared in amazement at the brief communication.

"Did you see the gentlemen, Mrs. Packer? It could not have been young Master Tom from the Hall, could it? Did you know these people?"

"Yes sir, I did see them. It wasn't young Master Tom, sir, as I've knowed since he was born. I never set

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eyes on these two before in my life. The little dark, foreign-looking gentleman said as how his name was Mr. Farraday, and the other was a red-faced man, like a sailor."

"There must be some mistake somewhere," said Nathaniel easily. "Now, Mrs. Packer, is tea ready? These hot summer days make me so thirsty."

"Yes, sir, in five minutes," and Mrs. Packer bustled off.

Nathaniel closed his eyes and dismissed the incident of the two strangers from his mind. He felt at peace with all the world, and a smile of contentment rested on his lips. George was still in London with Dr. Richardson, and Nathaniel felt eminently satisfied with him and his prospects. The young man was working with a will, and his senior partner could not say enough in his praise. George had written saying that Richardson was giving him a month's holiday either in July or August, and that he thought he would take a trip to Normandy—would his old Nunc join him? Nathaniel thought it would be an excellent idea.

The Farradays had returned from Cannes, where they had gone directly after Tots's funeral, and Sir Alec was again on his old friendly footing with Nathaniel, and would often drop in to consult him, or ask him up to the Hall, but, so far, there had been no further mention of George, although Nathaniel tacitly understood that Sir Alec thought he had been rather too hasty with the young man, and that in time he might look more favourably on his suit. Jim Dudsworth was never asked again as a guest to Farraday Hall. He sometimes gave them a surprise visit, driving over in his motor at breakneck speed, and raising curses as deep as his own trail of dust

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from the country folk as he dashed along the village roads.

Nathaniel felt satisfied with life, and more than satisfied with his dear boy, who was such a comfort to him in his old age—his thoughts became indistinct after this, and he dropped off to sleep again, until roused by Mrs. Packer's vigorous voice telling him tea was ready.

Meanwhile, the two strangers, who had arrived that morning and were staying at the Farraday Arms, the only inn that Dane Hill boasted, asked their way to the Hall. Leaving the village street, they turned off on the side-path to follow the short cut to Farraday Hall. The elder man, James Mactarvish, was stout and florid, burnt a deep rich red brown by a tropical sun and an overwhelming partiality for ardent spirits. He gave his name and parentage as Scotch, and he was certainly dragged up, mostly in the gutter, at Dundee; but a certain sharp, fox-like look in his tawny eyes, as well as certain characteristics in his build and manners, pointed to another strain in his blood. His father, the elder Mactarvish, had been a sailor, and during one of his coasting voyages by the Bosphorus and Levant it had been his misfortune to meet a woman for whom he left his seafaring life, and with whom he lived for a couple of years. She was a mixture of Grecian, Turkish and Jewish, and had originally been a slave in the harem of a rich Turk. During these two years the younger Mactarvish was born, but, as was to be expected, the ill-assorted couple quickly grew tired of each other, and one day the man found himself alone with the baby on his hands. What was the subsequent fate of his mother James never heard. Mactarvish brought his son back to Dundee with him, where after a few years

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he married a fine, thrifty Scotch woman, who repeatedly had to turn the lying, thieving boy out of the house ; and finally, to solve difficulties, his father shipped him before the mast. He drifted to Calcutta, and had remained in India ever since, and this was his first return to England for nearly thirty years. Such was the true story of the birth of James Mactarvish, and it was poured often enough into his unwilling ears by his father and step-mother ; he sternly suppressed it, and never alluded to it, but it was, nevertheless, always a thorn in his side.

The younger man, walking close behind Mactarvish's eager footsteps, was undoubtedly an Oriental, or partially one. He was short and thin, with small hands and feet and slim hips, his colour was a clear olive-brown, his eyebrows strongly marked with the deep curve only seen in Eastern races, and his eyes were full and lustrous. He called himself Thomas Farraday and in his slightly aquiline nose and a certain trick of carriage, there was a faint resemblance to his late father, for this was Leila's baby—little Bulbul, grown to man's estate.

When they reached the Hall they asked to see Sir Alec Farraday, and were politely shown into the small sitting-room where the latter usually interviewed his tenants.

"By gum! This 'ere's a fine place, and no mistake, eh, Bulbul, my sonny?" remarked Mactarvish, in an accent whose groundwork had once been Scotch, but which was now as cosmopolitan as his parentage.

"Oh, *do* not make a noise, they may *hear* you," exclaimed the younger man in alarm, his speech fully showing by its *chi-chi* twang that he had been brought up in India, "and *do* not call me Bulbul now, you must call me Tarmas ——"

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"Oh, ho!" laughed Mactarvish, "Thomas!"

The footman gravely entered and told them that Sir Alec Farraday was out, but that Master Tom would see them if their business was urgent.

"Another Thomas," remarked Mactarvish with a snigger.

"Yes," said Bulbul pompously, trying to disguise his nervousness. "Will you tell Mr. Tom that Mr. Tarmas Farraday wishes to *see* him?"

Bulbul pronounced his name as *Far-ray-dé*, and the footman caught the sound without connecting it in the least with his master's name. He conducted both of them to the West Terrace, where Margery and Tom were having tea, and introduced them solemnly:—

"Mr. *Ferraydé* and Mr. Mactarvish, sir, to speak to you".

Tom and Margery looked at their visitors in well-bred but unfeigned surprise.

"Oh, er—how do you do?" asked Tom. "I hear you wish to see my father, unfortunately he is out. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I don't think you quite grasped the name—this 'ere," with a theatrical wave of a very dirty hand, "this 'ere, is Mr. Thomas Farraday," said Mactarvish, indicating Bulbul.

Tom looked bewildered, he had never heard of any other family of Farradays, and when he saw the foreign-looking little man in front of him, gravely bowing and scraping, his astonishment was complete.

Mactarvish had not removed his hat, his shifty tawny eyes were roving everywhere, and rested with satisfaction on the silver tea-service with its dainty cups and saucers.

Margery said gently:—

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"I think there must be some mistake, I have never heard of any other Farradays before".

Bulbul was too overcome with nervousness to answer immediately.

"No, no, there's no mistake," Mactarvish broke in, before his companion could pull himself together in time to reply. "Ye'll find out soon enough it's no mistake, and I'm thinking ye'd best ask us to sit down, and give us a cup of tea." Margery and Tom heard with surprise the insolence in his tone, it was the first time any one had ever spoken so in their presence.

"I am Tarmas Farraydé," said Bulbul, finding his tongue. "My poor papa was Alec Farr—I mean Sir Alec—I mean *to* say—if he was *a*-live, he would be Sir Alec —"

Mactarvish cut him short.

"Our young friend here's a wee bit mixed, but he's got his facts right enough. He is the only son of the real Alec Farraday, who died about ten years ago, and I am married to his sister, Nettie, and we've turned up to claim the blooming lot."

Tom and Margery looked at each other and smiled.

"There is some mistake," repeated Margery soothingly ; she thought they had both escaped from some lunatic asylum and needed careful handling.

"Oh, no, there is *no* mistake," Bulbul said eagerly, "Farraydé Hall belongs to me, and *to* my sister, *Nettie* ; we have come all the way from Mhudapur to get the *propertee*, we have spent *five* thousand rupees."

"In any case," said Tom suavely—he had the same idea as Margery, that the men were escaped madmen—"your business is with my father, Sir Alec ; he is out at present,

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but if you will call again, you can discuss the matter with him."

"Very well," answered Bulbul. "Tell your father that Mr. Alec Farraydé's son, Tarmas, has come from Mhudapur to get his *propertee* back; I will come and see him to-morrow. Good-bye," and with two or three awkward jerky little bows he turned to go.

"Ta-ta," said Mactarvish, "You young buddies are fairly cheeky—you'll sing small enough though when you have to turn out of this, bag and baggage."

The visitors walked off, Mactarvish, having set his hat at a jaunty angle was whistling unconcernedly, and looking round the gardens as if he owned them. The brother and sister looked at each other, and then burst out laughing.

"They must be lunatics! Oh, Tom, did you see the funny weird patent leather boots with elastic sides that the little man had on?"

"That other brute wants kicking and he'll get it if he comes here again. They are lunatics at large—they must be. Wait till the Governor and Mater come home and we'll make them roar with laughter—Thomas Farraday indeed!"

"Yes, and fancy saying that Sir Alec Farraday had been dead for ten years! Poor things, they are hopelessly mad, but the little man looked harmless. I did not like the look of the other—I don't ever want to see him again, he makes me feel very nervous."

"I don't suppose we shall hear of them again until they are safely lodged in some asylum," said Tom carelessly, little guessing how closely their destinies were woven with his own.

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"Tom dear, I think perhaps we had better say nothing to Mother about them, unless Daddy thinks it wise. You know that her nerves are so bad that the least thing upsets her, and the news that a couple of lunatics are at large will only scare her to death, and she will imagine that we shall all be killed. Don't you think, Tom, you had better tell Daddy after dinner to-night, and then, if he considers it wise, we can tell Mother? I am afraid she will be feeling very upset when she comes home; Daddy has taken her to see Tots's grave."

A short silence fell between the two. They were young, and the acuteness of their sorrow was over, but any casual mention or thought of little Tots always brought the tears to Margery's eyes.

"Buck up, old girl, don't fret," said Tom, patting her shoulder. "If the Mater thinks you're fretting it will only worry her, and upset her more than ever. Come on, and let's have a game of tennis, I'll give you forty in every game and beat you, come on."

Lady Mary looked worn and ill at dinner-time, and both children understood how her heart must have been wrung by the sight of the little grave with its simple marble cross,—“Mary Farraday—‘Tots’—the youngest and dearly beloved child of Sir Alec and Lady Mary Farraday, Aged five years”—with the dates of her birth and death, and underneath ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus’.

Although her hope and faith were firmly grounded, the poor mother felt the void in her arms and the ache in her heart that never seemed to grow less.

Margery and Cicely drew her out on the terrace with Frizzie after dinner, while Tom stayed to have a cigarette with his father.

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"Do you know, Dad, such a strange thing happened this afternoon, and as we knew that the Mater would be upset after going to Fletching, Margery thought I had better tell you first, and see what you think about it."

"Yes, Tom," said Sir Alec, absently cutting off the end of a cigar. His thoughts were centred, too, on the little white cross in Fletching Churchyard, and he was thinking that fate had used him very cruelly in taking away his youngest and loveliest child. He little knew that the news that Tom would give him that evening would be the heaviest blow he had ever experienced.

"Two lunatics came up to the house this afternoon and asked for you. As you were out, Vickers brought them to me. We were having tea on the West Terrace. They were both quite mad. One gave his name as James Mactarvish and the other as Thomas Farraday. They talked a lot of rot about coming from a place called Mhudapur and spending five thousand rupees."

"Mhudapur!"

Sir Alec's face turned white and he gripped the arms of his chair. Tom, who was choosing and lighting a second cigarette, did not notice his father's demeanour.

"Yes, they were queer beggars. They said that Sir Alec Farraday had been dead for ten years, and that they had come to claim the estate—propertec—the little chap called it."

"My God!" said Sir Alec faintly.

Tom gave a startled look at his white, drawn face.

"Why, what on earth is the matter, Dad? Are you feeling seedy?" and he sprang to his father's side.

"Please get me a glass of brandy."

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Tom poured it out with a shaking hand and held it to Sir Alec's pallid lips. He gulped it down and then got control over himself again.

"They were not lunatics, Tom—they have come to contest the estate. I had almost forgotten"—he buried his face in his hands, and groaned.

"Contest the estate?" said Tom in bewilderment; "but why? They have no right to it—have they, Dad?"

"No, no, of course not. They are both impostors," said Sir Alec sharply.

"That's all right; don't you worry, Dad. It'll be like the Druce case over again, and we'll make them look very foolish. Of course, you know, if the estate *really* belonged to them, and not to us, but we had held it all these years under a mistaken impression that we were entitled to it, we should be in honour bound to give it back to them, but as they are silly fools claiming what they have no right to, why, we'll just laugh at them." Tom was doing his best to buck his father up and give him a cheerful view of the situation. He little knew how his innocent words added to Sir Alec's worries.

"In honour bound," Tom's earnest young voice seemed to reach his father through a fog. "In honour bound!"

Sir Alec shivered, he realised that this was a fight he must wage with a lone hand. Tom must never know the truth, even if he got to suspect —

"Oh, of course," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "Now describe these two men, that you first thought were lunatics," he tried to talk naturally, but the roof of his mouth was so dry he could hardly articulate his words.

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"The one who called himself Thomas Farraday was a short, thin man, quite brown, with a slightly hooked nose—he was dressed most weirdly. He had on a ready-made blue and brown check suit, and patent leather boots with elastic sides, Margery and I roared over them, and such a tie! Great Scott! It nearly gave me a bilious attack. It is too absurd to *think* of such a specimen being a Farraday, besides, he looked like a—like a—well, Indian or Italian."

"Naturally ; go on. Who was the other ?"

"A man called Mactarvish—a perfect brute, he is most uncouth, and was downright impertinent to-day. He is the other man's brother-in-law, he has married this so-called Thomas Farraday's sister, Nettie. He is a most repulsive-looking man, I should take him to be much older than the little chap ; he must be forty at least. A coarse, dark, fierce-looking brute."

"Mactarvish ? Mactarvish ?" repeated Sir Alec musingly, then as a light broke in on him, "Merciful Heaven !" he exclaimed, and again gripped the arm of his chair. He realised that he was in a very tight corner, and that it would need some pluck and severe fighting to pull things through. He got up, and standing at the French window that opened to the ground he thought rapidly for a few seconds. He must have help—whose ? Whom could he absolutely depend on ? None of his own must ever know or suspect. Nathaniel ? The very man !—He would not only understand, he would help him ! Yes, he could trust old Targett.

"Tom, get the dog-cart harnessed and drive over to Dane Hill Lodge and tell old Mr. Targett I wish to see him to-night, as a personal favour. Bring him back with

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you and don't mention those men who came to-day to him, or any one else—least of all to your mother, and caution Margery not to speak of the matter."

Tom cheerfully set out for his drive through the beautiful summer twilight. Sir Alec went out on the terrace and joined his wife and daughters.

"Mary love," he said gently, "I have sent for Nathaniel Targett on urgent business, and when he comes it may take us fairly long to discuss matters thoroughly. Go to bed, dear, and don't wait for me. I will not disturb you, I will sleep in my dressing room."

"But, Alec, dear, how inconsiderate of you to want to talk business at this hour."

"Mother darling, Dad's been away such an age, there must be an accumulation of troubles for him to wade through—he's such a splendid landlord you know," said Margery gaily, whose quick wits had grasped that the visitors of the afternoon were the cause of Nathaniel's visit and the urgent business her father referred to.

Sir Alec wished his family good-night, kissing them with extra warmth and love and went indoors to his private study. He ordered sandwiches and whisky to be placed on a small table, and lighting the electric lights sat and waited for Nathaniel.

He had not to wait long. In a short time the clip-clap of the horse's hoofs could be heard along the avenue, and then Nathaniel's voice talking to Lady Mary on the terrace. Sir Alec unlocked his desk and took out the pile of letters, papers and photographs given him long ago by the dead Alec Farraday. He resolved to trust Targett thoroughly with the whole story, and then get his advice

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as to how to meet these claimants, who were, indeed, the true heirs.

“I will never give up Farraday Hall,” he said to himself. “They will have to go to law, and they will have to prove everything. Possession is nine points of the law. I will never give up the Hall—and the name.”

CHAPTER XIV

"It is indeed good of you to come over, Targett," and Sir Alec wrung Nathaniel's hand with unaccustomed warmth.

"And what is this important business that drags me out of my comfortable chair at ten o'clock at night?" laughed the old man, seating himself at the table.

Sir Alec put the packet of papers, letters, etc., into his hands.

"I have seen all these before, Sir Alec; it must be quite twenty years ago that I went through all these documents."

"You were firmly convinced of my identity?" queried Sir Alec.

"Absolutely. Your identity was firmly established, as well as your claim to the estate. You were in possession of every necessary document and fact—there was never the least trouble in proving your right to everything."

"There never was—there never has been, the least doubt in your mind that I was not the legal heir?"

"Not even the suspicion of a doubt has ever crossed my mind," replied the old man, gravely looking at the disturbed face opposite to him. "These questions point to one conclusion, some question has arisen in connection with your possession of the Farraday estates?"

"Exactly. Would it be easy to establish my claims in a court of law?"

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"It depends on the nature of the arguments brought by the other side. I am quite in the dark, Sir Alec ; if you don't trust me, I am afraid I cannot advise you as fully as I would wish."

"I can trust you, Targett, and you are the only living man I can say that to ; but, I am giving you a great responsibility. You are a just and upright man and your—views—might not sympathise with my actions. Before I dare tell you everything you must make me a solemn oath never to reveal what I am about to tell you. Should your conscience demand that you have no further dealings with me—even then, what I tell you must never be told to another."

Nathaniel sat in silence for a few minutes, then he said : "It is rather like a leap in the dark, but I have known you intimately for twenty years, Sir Alec, and I have the highest respect for you, so I can trust you in this matter, and give you my solemn word that I will never reveal what you are about to tell me."

"That is all I want, Targett. Now, what do you make of this ?"

Sir Alec put into Nathaniel's hand the copy of the certificate of marriage between Alec Farraday, bachelor, and Angela (Leila) Singh, spinster, and all the particulars of dates and witnesses.

Nathaniel read it over, slowly, twice.

"This is, of course, a copy. There is an original. Where is it ?"

"In the Roman Catholic Church, at Chinsurah, I suppose."

"This marriage took place twenty-five years ago. You married Lady Mary Mowbray quite twenty years ago—I trust that the wife of the first marriage was dead, or

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legally divorced before you married Lady Mary? This marriage certificate," laying his hand on the document, "is perfectly legal, as you have admitted that there is an original in the church books, and it is quite in due form."

Targett was looking very anxious, he began to see trouble coming for the Farraday family.

"*I* never married that native woman, but she was the legal wife of Alec Farraday, for all that. Now, I will tell you everything," and Sir Alec conscientiously told Nathaniel the whole history of his early life, giving every minute detail he could remember, and the full circumstances of the deed of gift made him by the dead and gone Alec Farraday.

"If you remember," he concluded, "I postponed my marriage with Lady Mary until I was fully assured that my identity was firmly established and my title to the estates proved to the hilt. You, yourself, assured me then, as you did to-night, that there never was the least difficulty, or doubt. Now it seems that Alec's son, Thomas he says his name is, and another man Mactarvish have turned up, and told Margery and Tom this afternoon they have come to claim the estate. I have been in possession all these years, surely this boy cannot turn me out?"

Old Targett sat in deep silence for a few minutes. Bewilderment and intense surprise were the first impressions that Sir Alec's story made on his mind; he had to re-adjust all the facts and pre-conceived notions of twenty years, and put them on a different grounding. He felt as a man feels in an earthquake, that the solid earth he has put his faith and trust in was but a shaky and undependable fabric after all. He sat with his grey head sunk upon his hands.

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"What do you make of it, Targett?" Sir Alec asked gently.

The old man drew his hand across his brow and sighed deeply, and just for one moment Sir Alec dreaded meeting his eyes and hearing his verdict; he was acutely aware that it was this man's nephew and adopted son that he, an adventurer, a mere nobody, had despised and driven from his house in contempt.

But he need not have feared. In Nathaniel's gaze he read nothing of reproach or condemnation. The old man was bewildered and surprised at first, but his feelings of friendship were as steady as a rock.

"And what happened to the real Sir Alec Farraday?"

"He died in Mhudapur ten years ago. You are aware that I have always sent, and still send, £500 a year to a family of Murrays residing in India? After the death of my poor friend I continued the annuity to his family, and meant to make it a gift to them and their heirs for ever after my death. I heard that the mother died about three years ago. Alec took the name of Alec Murray when he went to Mhudapur and is buried there as such. It was his wish that none of his children should ever own Farraday Hall. I hope you don't blame me, Targett, I have tried to live up to the trust he gave me, and my faults and mistakes have been occasioned by my high ideals of the family name and position."

Nathaniel knew he was referring to and trying to defend his treatment of George. Before he could reply Sir Alec went on, "I have trusted you entirely, Targett, and I leave the matter in your hands. Give me the assurance that you will stand by me—come what may. Of one fact though, I must warn you, I will never give up Farraday Hall unless I am driven from it. I promised poor Alec

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I would hold it, even against his children, and I will stick to my word."

"I'll stand by you, Sir Alec; we'll put our heads together and see this matter through. The dead Alec Farraday chose very wisely when he appointed you his representative, you have been a just landlord, and a splendid steward of the wealth entrusted to you. I need not say more—I do not blame you in the least, and, having entered into possession, I quite agree with you that nothing short of legal force, should drive you out. Let me fully understand the position—who else knows the story you have told me to-night?"

"Not a soul in the world. I have kept the secret in my heart all these years—not even to Lady Mary have I breathed a word. My children must never know, or even suspect, that they are not Farradays; Tom would give back everything if he knew the truth."

"I wonder where these people got their information? I suppose you don't know as yet. They are coming to see me to-morrow morning at ten; it is just as well you sent for me to-night, I shall be prepared for them. By-the-way before I go, who is the other man, James Mactarvish? Where does he come from?"

"It is his presence that adds to my danger considerably. When I first met Alec Farraday we were both working at a mill at Bally, near Calcutta, he as a clerk, and I as one of the sub-engineers. I have not seen this James Mactarvish but there was a ruffianly scoundrel of that name, quite a boy, working there with us. He saw us both together and would know that I was Fred Carvill. In addition to which, he gives himself out as young Thomas's brother-in-law, so he has married the other child, Nettie."

"The dead Alec Farraday had only two children?"

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"That was all. Nettie was born after my marriage with Lady Mary, she is about nineteen and Thomas is twenty-one or twenty-two."

"Then this man, James Mactarvish, must be middle-aged, and it is twenty years ago—do you think he would recognise you?"

"He was a boy of twenty or thereabouts—that would make him forty now. I have changed of course, and he might not remember that he knew me as Fred Carvill—I really don't know what information they have got hold of—you must try and find that out for me to-morrow, Targett."

"You are nothing like the Farraday family," remarked Nathaniel musingly.

"Totally different types. Alec had dark eyes and an eagle nose. My difference in appearance has always been put down to my supposed mother—whom I am thought to resemble."

Targett gave a start. Suddenly the incident of the only occasion on which he saw the boy Alec came to his mind, with the recollection of the impression he had then received that the child had looked at him with dark brown eyes. "So I was right after all," thought the old man.

"Can you see a way out of all this trouble?" asked Sir Alec.

"That marriage certificate is in your way—if the other side know of it, and I suppose they do. We must wait and leave them to show their cards,—keeping quiet, and trusting to something turning up. It may be a big game of bluff on their part, to blackmail you, and get more money out of you. But there is no hurry—we can discuss matters after I have seen these people. It is very late, Sir Alec, and I must be off."

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"I have kept the dog-cart for you, Targett. Thank you very much for coming over to-night, you have taken a great load off my mind, you have proved yourself indeed a friend."

With a hearty handshake the men parted, but all the way home, while the groom drove the fast-trotting cob, Nathaniel sat piecing together the tale Sir Alec had told him.

"To think he is not Sir Alec after all! It is the biggest surprise I've ever had in my life. He's a good sort and deserves to keep the Hall. It will be terrible for Lady Mary, and Margery—sweet little Margery—if they are all turned out. No, no, we can't let that happen—however hard we have to fight, we must keep Sir Alec where he is."

Punctually at ten the next morning the two men were shown into Targett's private room. He rose slowly and adjusted his gold pince-nez as they entered, giving them a cold scrutinising glance, but betraying no signs of undue interest in their appearance. They were rather over-awed by the polite, distinguished bearing of the old man, the type of lawyer they expected to see, was very different.

"Looks like a blooming parson," growled Mactarvish in what he intended to be *sotto voce*, but Nathaniel had sharp ears.

Waving his hands towards the chairs, he requested them to be seated, and both sat down, awkwardly enough, and obviously ill at ease.

"You are Mr. Thomas Farraday and Mr. Mactarvish, I presume?" said Nathaniel, reading from the slip of paper they had left with him the previous afternoon.

"Right you are," replied Mactarvish.

"You have called to see me on urgent private business."

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Now what can I do for you?" pushing aside a few papers, Nathaniel rested his arms on his table and looked the two men full in the face.

Bulbul sat twisting his hat in his hands; Mactarvish cleared his throat with unnecessary vehemence and began:—

"Ye see, well, it's like this. This chap 'ere," indicating Bulbul, "is my brother-in-law, and his name is Thomas Farraday. We have come from India to claim a big house and a pot of money. We're going to do things fair and square, so we've come to you."

"Exactly. I understand, then, that you are Mr. James Mactarvish, brother-in-law to Mr. Thomas Farraday? Now what is this 'claim' you speak of?"

"We've come to get the place known as Farraday Hall, and our little sonny 'ere will be Sir Thomas, eh, Bulbul? How'll that fit your figure?"

"Farraday Hall is in the possession of Sir Alec Farraday, who has fully proved his legal right to it. May I ask if you are not under some mistake?"

"No, no, there ain't no mistake, my good sir. You can bet your hat I wouldn't be in this job if I wasn't sure of my ground. The man at the Hall is a blooming impostor, and I don't care who hears me say so."

"I am a personal friend of Sir Alec Farraday's, as well as his family solicitor; perhaps you had better see some one else," said Nathaniel coldly.

"There ain't any other blooming lawyer in this God-forsaken hole," was Mactarvish's polite reply.

"Now do not be angry, Mr. Targett; we are not trying to make a confusion—we do not want to make a row. I have come from India to claim the *propertee*, I have proofs. I am legal son of Alec Farraydé."

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Bulbul handed another copy of the certificate of marriage between Alec Farraday and Angela Singh across to Nathaniel, who perused it slowly, thinking all the while—"So this is the real heir to Farraday Hall—nearly a native! No wonder the dead Alec did not wish his children to inherit the estate."

"You see, Mr. Targett, my father, Alec Farraydé, and my mother Angela Singh, most respectable native lady."

"You claim that Sir Alec is your father——" began Nathaniel, but Mactarvish, who always liked to be spokesman, interrupted.

"Not this buster as you call Sir Alec, but the real man, who died in Mhudapur about ten years ago. This chap up here is a blooming fraud, his real name was Fred Carvill, I knew 'em both when I was a lad."

"I must ask you a few questions, Mr. Farraday, and I must ask you not to interrupt, Mr. Mactarvish. It is a very intricate matter, and if both of you are talking together, it is difficult to understand what you are saying."

"Oh, all right, fire ahead. But don't ye forget I'm boss of this concern, and Bulbul does what I tell him. Lor' love yer, he'd never have come out here, but fer me," and the ample breast of James Mactarvish swelled with pride.

"I can quite believe that," said Nathaniel drily. "Now Mr. Thomas—your whole attention, please. Have you the baptismal certificates of yourself and your sister?"

Bulbul handed him two documents. One certified that Thomas Farraday had been duly baptised in the church at Chinsurah, twenty-two years previously, and the other attested the baptism of Natalie Murray in the Roman Catholic Church at Mhudapur.

"To whom does this refer?" asked Nathaniel, laying his hand on the latter document.

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"To my sister Nettie—James's wife."

"Why are the names different—one is Farraday and the other is Murray?"

"We all were always called Murray in Mhudapur."

"Now what grounds have you for supposing that your father was Alec Farraday?"

"James knew him, long time ago. He was a boy then, eh, James? He called him Alec Farraday, and when James came to Mhudapur, before my poor father died, he called him Alec Farraday always."

"What did your father say?"

"He said—he said—James did not know the truth. He said he was Alec Murray. My father was very kind to James—and gave him money—and got him a job."

Mactarvish growled an interruption:—

"Here, are all these private matters going to be blabbed out? I don't think all these questions are any good."

"I am trying to put together the facts as I glean them," said Nathaniel in an even, judicial voice. "Unless I know exactly what you claim, and on what grounds, it will be impossible for me to advise you. Now, Mr. Farraday—kindly continue. Your father denied he was Alec Farraday—and then —"

"He died, and a long time after he died my poor mother gave James this copy of marriage certificate. She told him to look after us, when she was dead." Emotion shook Bulbul's voice and Nathaniel saw his eyes were full of tears.

"I think I'd better chip in; Bulbul will take all day telling the story. Well, poor woman, she was a good sort, and fairly doted on those two kids, and I told her I'd marry Nettie, if she'd tell me all about her husband, and why he changed his name. She said he came in for a large

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estate and gave it up to another man, Fred Carvill, and that when Fred Carvill left for England, he went off to Mhudapur as Alec Murray. She was dotty on one point—they both promised they would never claim the estate while she lived. She said she had promised their father, and no luck would follow if they ever claimed the Faraday name. After her death we saved up a good bit of oof, and I made them trot along to get what belongs to them. I married Nettie before the old girl died, so she was quite satisfied, and here we are."

"I understand perfectly. Now, to sum up your claim. You, Mr. Mactarvish, knew a man (buried as Alec Murray,) as Alec Farraday when you were both young men together; and as Alec Farraday the same man married Leila Singh, and Thomas his son was christened under that name. These are your grounds—are they not?"

"You've got it all right. Now, we don't want to make a row. We don't want no law courts. I'm not spending any money that way, if I can help it. What we want is this—tell this man, Fred Carvill, his game is up, and that we know all about him. He'll find it very difficult to explain those certificates. Then, tell him, from me, James Mactarvish, he's got to quit."

"Granted that I tell him this, and he refuses to give up his estate, what then?"

"He won't refuse. He's not that sort. Tell him I'm on the scene and he'll know what he's got to expect. We'll give him £500 a year if he doesn't make a fuss, and if he goes quietly. If he makes us go to law, I'll not give him a blooming penny."

"Those are your terms, Mr. Farraday?"

"Oh yes, James always does what is best. I leave everything to him."

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"And we'll give him a month—till the first week in August,—to make up his mind," added Mactarvish, with a sudden access of generosity.

"You wish me to convey this message to him?" asked Nathaniel.

"You've hit the nail on the head, first time, old man," replied Mactarvish who was beginning to lose his awe of Targett.

"Now, please, before you go, allow me to point out the weakness of your claim. If this man, Alec Murray, was really Alec Farraday, why did he not claim the estate while he was alive?—why did he allow this Sir Alec to come to England and enter into possession of Farraday Hall? I may mention that Sir Alec has every possible proof in his possession that he is the legal heir."

"He stole those papers," shouted Mactarvish, banging a coarse red hand on the table, "he's a common thief, and a liar—bust him!"

"In my room, Mr. Mactarvish, I cannot allow this language. Now, Mr. Farraday, I want a plain answer from you—Do you accuse this gentleman, known as Sir Alec Farraday, of having *stolen* those papers?"

Nathaniel fixed his eyes, keenly and searchingly on Bulbul's face. The young man wriggled and twisted about in his chair, and shot an appealing glance at Mactarvish who frowned heavily and warningly at him.

"Mother said—she said—" he began stammering.

"Mother said! You fool!" and Mactarvish took him roughly by the arm and shook him. "Blast this chicken-hearted nigger; shut your blooming jaw, you fool. Yes, of course this chap stole those papers."

Targett rose from his chair.

"If you have anything further to say to me. Mr. Farra-

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day, you can appoint a day, and I will see you. In the meanwhile I will lay your claim before Sir Alec and will communicate with you when he instructs me what to reply. Good-day."

He touched a bell, and one of his clerks appeared.

"Show this gentleman out, Edwards," he said. Mactarvish lifted his hat off the table and strode wrathfully out of the room. Bulbul was visibly frightened, his hands trembled pitifully as he took up his hat.

"I am sorry for you, Mr. Farraday," said Nathaniel leaning towards him and speaking gravely and kindly. "You have fallen into the hands of a bad man—and a bully. Take my advice, and get away from him."

With a whispered "Thank you," and a frightened glance in the direction of Mactarvish's back, Bulbul shuffled out of the room.

Nathaniel sat in thoughtful silence for some time. He saw they had nothing to fear from the weak, timid, well-meaning little Thomas. He would have no initiative without Mactarvish, who was plainly the ruling spirit. Looking up suddenly, he saw Tom pass the window on horseback, his fine figure and fresh boyish face making a splendid pair to his thoroughbred hunter. The contrast between the two Thomas Farradays was startling.

Nathaniel reflected what a terrible thing it would be if all that power and wealth were given into the hands of the weak, timid half-caste; however legal his claim might be, it would eventually mean, if he succeeded to the estate, that James Mactarvish would rule at Farraday Hall, with Bulbul as the figure-head.

Targett sat a long while thinking over the problem, if he had only had the one to deal with, he saw enough of Bulbul's nature to know he was good-hearted, perhaps

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generous, and only weak to a degree of moral cowardice, and he would have worked on his feelings and induced him to relinquish his claims and return to India. The other man was of a different calibre. He wanted power and wealth and saw them both within his grasp. There was no generosity, no good of any kind, written on that coarse, brutal, yet fox-like face.

“And he’s married to this boy’s sister—well, poor girl, I pity her with that beast for a husband.”

Targett was still sitting lost in thought when Grimson brought some drafts and letters to him to sign. All the while, at the back of his brain, this thought kept repeating itself, over and over again: “How can we find a way out? How can we find a way out?”

CHAPTER XV

TOM rode gaily through Dane Hill village that morning, and with a laugh or a kindly word, he greeted the villagers he met, and those who came bobbing to the door to see him pass.

When he reached the Dane Hill Arms he found two or three old farmers, his father's tenants, seated on the wooden bench in the wide porch. He dismounted, and handed his horse over to the boy who ran out to meet him. Unconscious of the fate that was dogging his steps, he stood at the door, leaning against the post of the porch, and held a chaffing conversation with old Norby, the village wit, and Green, the landlord of the Arms.

Mrs. Green came to the door and dropped him a curtsy; Tom always had a smile and a kind word for all women, and was a great favourite with the buxom hostess of the village inn.

"Good-morning to ye, Master Tom, it's a fine morning, and how is Lady Farraday and the Squire? Will you take anything to drink, sir?"

Tom laughed.

"It's rather early to start drinking, Mrs. Green, at least for me—these good men have been hard at work since five o'clock and deserve their pint of beer,—however, if you'll bring me a glass of your own home-made cowslip wine I'll

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drink your health ; and fill up all the mugs all round, Mrs. Green."

A fervid "Thank you kindly, sir," from all the men present greeted this speech. They hastily drained their pewter mugs so as to lose none of the free pint.

Tom took his glass of mellow cowslip wine and stood with his back to the porch, discussing a case of "lamens" with Green, who was a great authority on horses.

"That's a proper squire an' no mistake," said Mrs Green, jerking her thumb in the direction of Tom's broad shoulders. "He's as fine a boy as ever stepped, an' no nasty vicious ways with him. I can remember him when he was but a baby, and rode his little pony, and called in here holding his father's hand, many and many's the time, bless his heart."

"What's this 'ere talk about another Master Tom Farraday a-stopping here with you?" asked Norby.

"Farraday indeed ! I like the sauce of him, the nasty little black toad, a-calling of hisself a Farraday ! He's as much a Farraday as I'm one. By the same token, here they come. I'm away inside, if you want anything, Mr. Norby, just tell the boy to bring it, I can't stand these foreigners and their ways ; " with a disdainful toss of the head, Mrs. Green withdrew.

Mactarvish was still in a bad temper, and pushing the men aside strode into the bar, flinging himself on a chair, and shouting for whisky.

"None of your darned rotten adulterated beer for me, give me good honest Scotch whisky."

Meanwhile, Bulbul recognised Tom and lingered outside, wishing to speak to him. As the latter was preparing to remount the little man went forward.

"Please do not go away—I want to talk to you."

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Looking at him Tom remembered him as the visitor of the previous evening, whom his father had declared was not a lunatic.

"Oh, you're Mr. *Tarmas* Farraday," said Tom smiling. "What is it you want with me?"

The chaffing, bantering tone aroused the easily excited temper of the little man.

"I *tell* you, I *tell* you, man," he began in a high-pitched voice, when Tom, putting his hand on his shoulder, wheeled him suddenly round and dragged him out of ear-shot of the curious group in the inn porch.

"That's a proper sort of Farraday," said old Norby, with pride, "the other chap," pointing to Bulbul contemptuously with the stem of his pipe, "is nothing but a measley little foreigner. I don't believe he ain't no Farraday at all," and he spat with deliberation and expression.

"What you—what are you doing to me?" gasped Bulbul recovering his breath with difficulty.

"You don't want the whole place to know your business I suppose?"

"I don't mind—I don't care if they all hear what I say; but," suddenly recovering from his momentary flash of temper, "I forgot that they were not natives, and could understand our talk. In India we never mind what we say in front of servants—they don't understand."

"All right," said Tom graciously, "fire ahead. What is it you want?"

"I have been to see your familee lawyer and he will lay my claim to the propertee—" Tom barely repressed a smile—"before your father. As honourable man, Sir Alec will at once give me the estate. I will not be unkind to you all, I will settle money on your father and mother, so

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please will you persuade Sir Alec to give up without fuss, and then we need not go to law."

"I fancy not," said Tom shortly, losing his temper. "It's all bunkum about your claim to the estate; you're nothing but a bally impostor, you had better not talk so big about settling money on us. If you carry on this game much longer you may get landed in jail, so I give you fair warning."

The mild expression faded from the brown face, and it contracted with a sudden spasm of rage.

"*You* call me impostor! You—you ——" English words failed Bulbul, he gasped in speechless anger. With trembling hands he drew the fateful copy of the marriage certificate from a note-book in his breast pocket. "See you here, you son of a low-born father! see you here—my father and mother honest people—your father and mother—"

Tom gave a contemptuous glance at the piece of parchment thrust into his unwilling fingers, but as his eye fell on his father's name in it his hand stiffened spasmodically over his riding crop.

"Great Scott!" he muttered between his teeth. He read it through and saw his father's name linked with that of a native woman—the world seemed to spin round.

"And are you—" pointing with his crop to the document he had returned, "and are you their child?"

"Yes, of course, I am. I am eldest son and heir of this Alec Farraydé," said Bulbul eagerly; he did not grasp the light in which Tom had read the information. "So I am not impostor—you—*you* are impostor—you, and your father and mother, and your familee," lifting his head with a haughty air Bulbul strode off, looking for all the world like an exaggerated bantam cock.

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Tom's physical training stood him in good stead. He gave no sign of the unconscious blow dealt him by the little half-caste, and mechanically mounting his horse he rode back home. Directly he reached the Hall he asked for his father, and he was relieved when he heard Sir Alec was out. He wanted to think things over by himself.

Margery, seeing him wander off to the garden alone, quickly joined him; she wished to hear more of their extraordinary visitors of the previous afternoon.

"Who were they, Tom? Why did Dad send for old Targett last night? Are they lunatics as we thought?"

Tom groaned. He was feeling very bitter and Margery seemed to be rubbing it in more by her innocent words.

"No, they're not lunatics, Marnie, I wish to goodness they were! They've come from India to claim the estate."

"Oh, Tom, how ridiculous! They cannot possibly be sane, why, every one knows that Father is Sir Alec Faraday, and that you are his eldest son."

"That's what I've just heard I am not. I've seen the little dark fellow again, and *he* is Father's eldest son. I've seen the marriage certificate—he's the true heir, Marnie."

"Tom! Oh, there must be some mistake—it can't be true. It can't possibly be true," and Margery's voice broke in horror—that little man their step-brother! "What did Dad say last night?"

"He said they were impostors—he deceived me, for, as I say, I saw with my own eyes, that he had married about twenty-five years ago some native woman in India."

"There must be some mistake, somewhere, Tom. Dad would never have denied it if it had been true."

"He doesn't know I've seen this certificate," said Tom

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bitterly, "and its beastly rough luck, that's all I've got to say, a measly little rotter like that—fancy having him as the heir of the family! and I meant to be such a splendid fellow, like father, and—and manage the estate when he gets older;—and all the chaps at college—what will they think when they hear that Father married a native!"

Tom groaned again and kicked the gravel savagely. His temper rose to a white heat against his father.

"How dare he?" he muttered, clenching his fists. "How dare he treat us like this? He should have been honest with us; I'll tell him what I think of him ——"

"Hush, Tom, don't talk like that. First hear what Dad has to say, and even then—if things are bad—don't round on him. It must be worse for him than it is for you. Besides, I cannot believe it of Dad. He has a bad temper, I know, but that is his only fault; he loves us all very dearly—he would never have wronged us like this."

Her voice grew husky as tears came to her eyes, and this brought Tom to his senses.

"All right, old girl, don't worry. I'll buck up and keep as cool as I can. He's been an awfully decent old sort, and we must stick by him—poor old Governor! Still, it's beastly rough luck on me, Marnie, isn't it?"

She nodded, she could not trust herself to speak.

When Sir Alec returned home he received a message that his son wished to speak to him in the study. He wondered vaguely if any fresh trouble were coming, and the sight of Tom's face increased his fears.

"Hallo, Tom, my boy, what's the matter?"

The kind blue eyes of his father searched his face anxiously.

"I asked to see you, sir, because I could not meet you casually until I heard the truth from your own lips."

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“Well, what is it?”

Sir Alec sat down wearily, he began to wonder what Tom had heard and dreaded the interview.

“I saw this morning the dark young man who—who calls himself Thomas Farraday—and he showed me a marriage certificate between Alec Farraday and some native woman.” Tom’s voice shook and stopped.

“Well?” said Sir Alec impatiently.

“Well?” echoed Tom, “then that boy is your eldest son—and if that woman was not dead when you married my mother ——” Tom’s eyes were blazing, his hands clenched.

Sir Alec gave a sigh of relief, mistakes are easily rectified, and he was thankful Tom had heard nothing worse.

“My boy, don’t think that of me! The first woman I married is your dear mother, and you are truly my eldest son. This young man does not claim that honour at all—what he says is—that his dead father was the true Sir Alec Farraday, and that I—I am, naturally, an impostor.”

“Ah, then to whom does the marriage certificate allude?”

“To this boy’s father, a man called Murray whom I knew when I was in India.”

“But—but the name was Alec Farraday—of course, Dad, I see it can’t be you—but then, who was it?”

“My dear Tom, there may be more Farradays in the world than ourselves—who can tell? I can assure you that I did not marry that native woman—surely you are convinced?”

There was a short silence, and then Tom crossed over the room and held out his hand:—

“I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon, Father; I’m

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beastly sorry, I ought to have known you better. Margery said it was impossible that the certificate referred to you."

They clasped hands, and Sir Alec smiled as he said:—

"Ah, Tom, women always judge by instinct and they are seldom wrong. Little Margery is a brick, so are you, my boy, for acknowledging that your judgment of me was a rash one. Now, don't worry about these people. Leave them in my hands, and don't give them another thought. I will soon send them about their business, and although I may have to go to law before they will relinquish their claim, still I have no fear of the ultimate issue; they have not got a leg to stand on and they shall never take Farraday Hall from me, and from you after me. They have not the least claim to the estate."

"I should think not, indeed," and Tom threw back his head and laughed. Now that his doubts concerning his birthright were set at rest he accepted everything his father said without question. He had been accustomed to regard himself as a Farraday of the Hall all his life, and that his father was not really a Farraday never crossed his mind.

Sir Alec was relieved that Tom asked no further questions, but accepted the meagre information he had given him. Although his words were sanguine, his hopes were not. He sighed as he thought of how he would meet the difficulties of the future, they looked fairly insurmountable to him, but he knew he must make no sign of a desponding spirit, and that he had to hide all his fears and anxiety behind an apparently unconcerned exterior.

The bright sunshine of the summer afternoon tempted the two visitors at the Dane Hill Arms to wander out of doors. Mactarvish took a brisk walk to Fletching village

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where he spent the afternoon in the local public house, imbibing liquor and informing every one of his claims, and the splendid prospects that he anticipated when Farraday Hall was his property.

Bulbul sauntered through the lovely country lanes and wished he had a carriage to drive in. Walking as exercise had no charms for the Eurasian. He met Aggie Packer, who came tripping towards him, a light basket on her arm. She was a bright-looking girl with a fine figure and a fresh country face, and she was thought very highly of by the villagers. She had two faithful admirers, Targett's stable boy Charles, and Vickers, the footman at the Hall; she had given neither of them any very definite encouragement, and privately considered herself too good for either of them.

At the present moment she was unattended, and Bulbul, when he came face to face with her, thought her a vision of loveliness. He was easily impressed by all forms of female beauty, and the clear pink and white of Aggie's complexion, her bright eyes, and her full, sturdy figure, appealed strongly to him. He stopped and gazed earnestly into the girl's face. She flushed and grew fidgety under his ardent eyes.

Bulbul had a certain amount of manners which were hereditary. His father had been a polished English gentleman, and the natives of India are by nature polite and courteous to a degree. He raised his hat and walking up to the girl said :—

“I beg your pardon for looking at you so rudely, but you are so pret-ty I cannot help it.”

Aggie regarded him with grave curiosity, she had met no one like him before. In her eyes he was quite a distinguished-looking gentleman.

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"May I carry your basket?" asked Bulbul, reading tacit encouragement in the girl's eyes.

Aggie felt inclined to say, "Yes, if you like, kind sir," after the manner of the old nursery rhyme. She gave it to him with a softly murmured "All right"; he took it proudly on his arm, and Aggie almost giggled. Wait till all the village people saw her! The flush on her cheeks deepened to a vivid rose; Bulbul noticed it, and his admiration began to sprout and grow in the rapid manner of Eastern love.

"Are you *one* of the young ladies at the Hall?" he asked.

"I'm Miss Margery's maid," answered she, giving him a quick glance from under her eyelashes. His dark, passionate eyes, met hers.

"What is your name?" he asked, adding, "I am Tarmas Farraydé."

Aggie gave a start, she had heard the gossip about him.

"I'm Aggie Packer, leastways, I should say Agnes Mabel Packer, but they all call me Aggie."

"May I also call you Aggie?" asked Bulbul, surprised at his own boldness.

"I suppose so—Mr. Farraday."

Her tone was very soothing to Bulbul's hurt feelings. He walked down the broad village street with the girl, and dutifully held her basket and all its contents.

Every one stared at them in amazement. Aggie completed her purchases and then turned to go back to the Hall.

"Good-day, and thank you for carrying my basket," she said, when they were once more in the lane.

"When shall I see you again?"

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Aggie gave a soft laugh, her cheeks were still flushed and her heart was beating with gratified vanity. Like all girls she dearly loved a conquest, and she rather admired the manners and looks of the little man, his dark skin did not repel her in the least.

He held on to the basket and she tried to take it from him. Letting go the basket he held her hands.

"Oh, well, since you want to know, I can usually get out for a walk every evening about seven, if it's fine, but I have to go in at eight; they're very kind to me and let me do pretty much as I like."

"Then where shall I see you? I don't know this country—do tell me!" he pleaded, still holding her hand.

"Ask your way to the heath and I'll be there, near the wicket-gate leading to the Hall, about seven," and with another soft laugh Aggie wrenched away her hand and the basket, and fled back to the Hall, leaving Bulbul gazing regretfully after her.

He found his way to the heath that evening, and so did she. She privately wondered what he saw in her, and he was delighted at his good luck, for he considered her the most beautiful and fascinating girl he had ever met. With him it was a case of love at first sight and with Aggie feelings of flattered vanity soon became warmer and tenderer, and she ended by reciprocating his affections. That, however, did not happen immediately.

Every fine evening and very often during the afternoon as well, they would meet and wander over the heath, or through the leafy Sussex lanes. This was Bulbul's first love affair and he was terribly in earnest; he opened out his heart to the girl and found in her a companion very suited to his inflammable nature. Her shrewd common sense was a balance to his impetuosity; he had a great

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respect for her, as Miss Aggie was essentially a young lady with her head screwed on very much the right way, and kept Bulbul at arm's-length in a delicate, coquettish manner, never giving herself away the least bit with him.

CHAPTER XVI

NATHANIEL TARGETT told Sir Alec the result of his interview with Bulbul and Mactarvish, and also expressed as his opinion, that if they could only explain away the marriage certificate, they would not have much more to fear.

"The little dark man is quite under the influence of that bully, Mactarvish and I fancy the latter is likely to prove a thorn in our sides. We must wait for this month of grace they've given us, and then see what steps they mean to take. My hope is that they have not much money and will soon run through it ; in the meanwhile, Sir Alec, we will be placable and polite and keep our eyes open. I would give a good deal for a feasible explanation of that marriage certificate."

"There is the boy's baptismal certificate too," said Sir Alec sadly.

"An explanation that would meet the one would also serve for the other. I wish we had Mactarvish out of the way, little Thomas would be easy to manage, he is quite a decent, well-meaning young fellow, though of course very weak."

"What is this I hear of a projected journey in August, Targett?" asked Sir Alec.

"George is taking a month's holiday and he wants me to go with him to Normandy—I thought of going, and,

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in fact, I had quite made up my mind to join him—old Joe Cutter gave you the news I suppose? If you need me, or wish me to remain here, Sir Alec, I will do so. In any case, since this trouble arose, I felt very disinclined to run away and leave the scene of battle.”

“You see, Targett, these fellows have given us till the first week of August; I would like you to be here, in fact I don’t know what I should do if you went away. As far as I am concerned,” said Sir Alec slowly, looking intently at his boots, “I should like to see your nephew down here again, and I will welcome him to the Hall, if he cares to come.”

Targett looked surprised, he had not expected this. “Thank you, Sir Alec, I will write to him and tell him what you say.”

The summer was a good one, and even the farmers had no cause of complaint against the weather, though, having no grievance of this nature was a terrible loss to them. When they met for their mugs of ale at the Dane Hill Arms, the wise old weather prophets shook their hoary locks and prophesied a terribly wet autumn.

“’Tis too good to last, sure-ly; ’tisn’t in nature to expect things to go on as well as this—why, Farmer Norby, here, has every ton of his hay stacked and ready—and this only the second week in July—aye, aye, there’s bound to be a wet harvest,” so the old men croaked. Beautiful and balmy as was the summer, it was not warm and sunny enough for Bulbul, he felt the cold intensely, and the sunshine seemed weak and faint to him, it never really warmed his bones, however long he might bask in it.

When Aggie Packer, in their frequent walks together, inquired after his sister Nettie, Bulbul, after many awk-

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ward pauses, confided to her that Nettie was shortly to become a mother, and was better remaining quietly in London.

"Nonsense," said the practical Aggie, "what nonsense! Why, you're paying for lodgings for her in London, and paying goodness knows what to Mrs. Green at the Arms for yourself and that Mactarvish. I know that the Hoadley's have a couple of rooms to let, why don't you go and live there all together and save a little money, instead of squandering it like this?"

The Hoadleys were the big grocers, drapers and general purveyors of Dane Hill and had a large old-fashioned house behind their shop in the village street. Aggie's advice appealed to Bulbul; all the money that had been so carefully saved was slipping through his fingers like water. Mactarvish was a continual and ever-increasing drain.

Bulbul wrote to his sister, and in a few days she was duly installed in the Hoadley's spare rooms with her husband and brother. Aggie was a frequent visitor, and her capable hands first showed poor helpless Nettie what an English girl could get through. They had a hired girl in from the village to do most of the work during the day, as Nettie had not even the faintest idea of how to set about cleaning, dusting or cooking, even the little garments for her coming baby had to be given out to be sewn. Mingled with contempt for her shiftlessness and untidiness, Aggie felt a very real pity for the poor girl. She was not yet nineteen and had been married to James Mactarvish for over three years, her first baby had died at its birth, and Aggie's kind heart ached for the delicate little brown-faced woman.

Mactarvish treated his wife with scant courtesy, he had married her on the chance of getting the Farraday money

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and had kept in with her, as he expressed it, until he could afford to be quite independent. Feeling for her he had none, unless deep and unmitigated contempt for her brown skin, her absence of personal beauty, and her general weakness, could be so termed. What he failed to see was her constant and unvarying gentleness, her personal cleanliness, her soft, clinging affection for himself and her brother. Whenever he returned drunk or half drunk, she waited on him with tender solicitude and never murmured however badly he treated her. She gloried in the fact that she was about to be a mother for the second time, although not yet out of her teens. In fact, Nettie was her mother over again, but her misfortune lay in the fact that she was married to a brute. Bulbul's sudden love for Aggie grew and increased every day. The quiet reticence of the girl kept back his ardour, and gave his affections time to grow deeper and stronger, while her coquettishness kept him for ever on tenterhooks of anxiety. All through the month of grace that Mac-tarvish had so generously allowed Sir Alec, Bulbul put in all his time trying to get Aggie to listen to his protestations, by the end of that period the intimacy between the two had grown in leaps and bounds, and the young woman had finally made up her mind to take the little half-caste. He had told her from their first meeting that he loved her, and wanted her to be his wife, but she had laughed away his words, and determined to find out for herself if his affection could be relied on.

He was walking with her one lovely evening towards the end of July, when his feelings overleapt the barrier of her restraint; he put his arms round her, shyly enough, and pleaded for her love. She judged she had kept him waiting long enough and told him so.

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"But what, what do you *mean*?" he asked, his eyes devouring her face in the dim twilight.

"What I say—how many times have you kept on asking me the same thing?" said Aggie coquettishly.

"I do not know, every day lately," he answered sadly.

"Well, you needn't ask me any more," then, seeing he failed to understand her meaning, she laid her soft crimson lips to his ear:—

"You old goose, I'll marry you if you want me, see?" Her plump arms went round his neck and, to Bulbul, life had nothing more to offer than the bliss he experienced during their first embrace.

Aggie's honest love and heart-whole admiration were very good for the young man. The better part of him developed rapidly and Mactarvish began to notice that his influence over the boy was lessening.

August came in wet, with a spell of soaking weather, and delighted the farmers by fulfilling their worst prognostications, although of course they grumbled more than ever at the variable English climate, and all the evils attendant on farming. By this time Aggie had quite made up her mind what course she wished her future husband to take, and when Mactarvish bragged of the wealth and position that would one day be theirs, her quiet cynical smile always roused his temper to fury. Nathaniel Targett had taken no further notice of them, and once the 8th of August had passed, James Mactarvish made up his mind that matters should not be allowed to stand over any longer, and that he would start the campaign in earnest, even going to law if necessary, and spending every penny of poor Bulbul's money.

"What a funny name they do call you," said Aggie one evening, "I cannot bring my tongue round it, Bulbul—

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why Bul-*bul*—two bulls? And bull, indeed, you're no more like a bull than I am like a sparrow—'t'other way round, I'm thinking. I can't, and won't call you Bulbul, what's your other name? Thomas? well, I'll call you, Tommy," and Tommy he remained to her to the end of his life.

He often spoke in glowing terms of their home in Mhudapur, and that part of his discourse sank deeply into Aggie's mind. He was an unconscious poet when he described the white bungalow set on the side of a hill, with graceful palms and beautiful shrubs on all sides of it. He told her of the rose gardens, and the syringa and myrtle groves, he described the white marble "cheebootra," where they sat under the leafy bamboo trees for early tea or in the cool of the evening, he spoke of the Indian nightingale from which he had been called "Bulbul" and of the starry mystery and sweetness of an Eastern night, the heavens glowing with the soft radiance of myriads of stars, the air heavy with the scent of the many richly-scented flowers.

"And what have you done with this beautiful house?" asked Aggie the practical. "You have never sold it, sure-ly?"

Bulbul lowered his voice:—

"I told James I tried *to* sell, but could not find a person *to* buy—but that is *not* true, I was offered *ten* thousand rupees for my house, but I would not give it up. My father and my mother told me not to sell—so I let it furnished for one year, for *one* thousand rupees."

"Lucky job for you, you didn't sell it. What would you have done when we go back to India?"

"But why should we go back to India? When I get Farraday Hall we will live there, in great wealth and prosperitee."

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"When! Yes, Tommy, when the pigs begin to fly. Now, do be practical—do you see any chance of ever getting Farraday Hall? You said, and James said, that Sir Alec would be frightened when he heard who you were and would quickly come to some arrangement; the month is nearly over now, and Sir Alec is as happy and peaceful as he's been since the poor little baby died—no, no, Tommy boy, they are not frightened of you, so don't you stuff yourself up with that."

"Yes, Aggie, I can see they are not worrying about me—I can see that. It was a *mistake* to come to England, how much my poor mother forbade us, she said no luck would come if we went away from Mhudapur, but it was not my fault—James did everything, and he made us come here,—all my money I had saved so carefully is going, and then *what* shall I do?"

"Where do you get your money from, Tommy?"

"From Sir Alec Farraydé. He sends us £500 a year, that is seven hundred and fifty rupees a month, we could save a lot on that," answered Bulbul.

"Well! Of all the born ganders!" Aggie's voice of contempt stung the young man like a whip. "*Now*, where will you get your £500 a year from? Sir Alec won't give it to you, after all you've said about him—making him out an impostor and all—well, of all the Jug-ginses!" words failed Aggie.

"I never thought of that," said Bulbul sadly, "James said we were *certain* to get Farraydé Hall and all the money, so I did not think of the £500 a year."

"And if you fail in this mad, wild-goose chase of yours, and I don't see a chance of your succeeding, you have nothing to live on for the rest of your life? Only the house in—what's the name of the place?—Mhudapur;

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why, Tommy, you are a luny! How are you going to keep me when we get married? Were you brought up to any trade, can you earn your living in any way?"

"My poor father died when I was in the Station school. I was only twelve years old, and I did not go back to school after his death as my mother said that a rich man like me didn't want much learning. James says he is an engineer, but he has not done any work since he married Nettie."

"Then—if you don't get the Farraday money it strikes me you'll be in the wrong box, and how do you suppose you are going to keep a wife on nothing a year?"

"What *shall* I do, Aggie?" cried poor Bulbul in alarm.

"I'll tell you what to do, Tommy lad, but don't let on to Mactarvish till you've done it. Get a private talk with old Mr. Targett and tell him you know you've made a mistake and if Sir Alec will give you the £500 a year you'll go back to India and never trouble him again. Now you mind what I tell you, and you'll be all right. Don't you be led by the nose by that James Mactarvish, I hate the very sight of his face. You've been a precious Juggins, my poor boy, you've been gulled by that other man; you've been like the dog in the story, you've grabbed at the shadow and dropped the substance."

"I wish I *had* not listened to him, Aggie darling, but do not be angry with me; I will only hear you now, I will do all that you tell me."

"Don't worry, Tommy dear, I'm not angry, bless your heart, but I feel vexed when I think of all you've thrown away—and what for? To try and get Sir Alec's place at Farraday Hall! As if you, without piles and piles of money, could hope to make him turn out! And what good would it do you if you did get the Hall? James

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Mactarvish would rob you of almost all your money, and he'd live with you and bully you, and drink even worse than he does now. Do you think you'd make friends, and that the gentry round would call on you? They'd see you further first. You see, Tommy dear, Sir Alec looks and talks like a Farraday, and you,—you are different, somehow."

"It's a pity you like me then, if I'm so different to Sir Alec," said Bulbul bitterly.

"Now, Tommy, don't be silly,—I'm different from the ladies at the Hall,"—she put her arms round his neck and her soft lips roamed over his eyes and cheeks till they reached his mouth. He forgot his momentary spell of anger as he clasped her passionately in his arms, and felt her breast throbbing on his.

"And whatever you are, Tommy lad," she managed to say between the kisses he rained on her, "don't forget, I love you; I love you dearly."

That same evening when they reached the Hoadley's they found Mactarvish waiting to speak to them.

"I'm for writing to the old buster at the Hall and telling him his month is nearly up—eh Bulbul, sonny?"

"You must not do *that*, you must go and see Mr. Targett," replied Bulbul uneasily.

"I suppose I'll have to wait a few days more, but don't ye think I'll ever give it up—I can easy see which way the wind sets with you, but you'll never get me to give up, and make myself look a pretty fool in the eyes of that d——d impostor at the Hall. Nettie's a Farraday, right enough, and I'm her husband, and I'm going to see that she gets her rights. You're a young fool, Bulbul, and you and Aggie will live to thank me yet. As I say, when my mind's fair set on a thing, I ain't the man to see it fall

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through. No, no, ma sonny, you're a weak bit of stuff, but in spite of yourself, I'll see you Sir Thomas Farraday, a-sitting in state at Farraday Hall."

They went inside, and Aggie got the supper ready, and lit the fire in the cosy little back parlour. Nettie always felt cold in the evening, and was too poorly to do much herself, even had she as much knowledge of household matters as Aggie. The poor girl was lying back on a chair, her face drawn, and purple shadows under her heavy black eyes. Her thin, listless fingers were idly toying with some fruit which Aggie had brought her from the Hall. Mactarvish, for a wonder, was sober.

"You do fare badly, Nettie," said Aggie sympathetically.

"Oh, I'll be *all* right; only another three or four weeks to wait now. I'll be *all* right as soon as my baby is born. I'm always like this before, eh, Jamie?"

"Wummin as is always getting kids don't ought to have no sympathy," remarked her loving husband. "I don't know why you wasn't contented with the one you had," he added severely.

"But it died," wailed Nettie, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Blast yer blooming waterworks. If you don't shut up I'll give you something to cry for," with a vicious snarl.

"You shut up yourself, James Mactarvish, or it'll be the worse for you. You shan't ill-use your wife when I'm here, and her that ill it'd melt a heart of stone to see her. You're in a Christian land and you must behave yourself or I'll know the reason why," and Aggie banged her capable white fist on the table.

Mactarvish had a wholesome horror of Aggie's tongue

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and her brisk, downright ways. In his secret heart he admired her immensely, and wondered what she saw in Bulbul; he considered her vigorous, full-blooded womanhood far more suited to himself than the anæmic fragile wife he possessed. In answer to Aggie's emphatic speech he growled and muttered, but relapsed into silence.

Nathaniel Targett had written to George after his interview with Sir Alec, telling him that, by special request, he was deferring his projected trip to Normandy, and also he fancied by some hints dropped by Sir Alec that George would be once more a welcome visitor at the Hall. He had also mentioned, in a casual way, that Sir Alec was a bit worried over a business matter of some importance, and that he had consulted his old friend and relied implicitly on his help to pull him through. George's answer to this epistle can be guessed. He gave up the idea of going to Normandy in August, and would be delighted to spend his month's holiday with his dear old Nunc, etc., etc. Nathaniel chuckled as he read the characteristic scribble. Meanwhile he had got no nearer to a solution of the problem that puzzled him. During his rambling walks over the heath he often met Bulbul and Aggie Packer walking arm-in-arm and whispering together, and the sight always pleased him, though he found it difficult to express what hopes he placed on the phenomena he witnessed, but at any rate he trusted Aggie, for whom he had a great liking and respect, to use her influence to counteract the evil guidance of Mactarvish. One afternoon a sudden unexpected downpour of rain found him walking on the heath near old Joe Cutter's cottage. He went inside for shelter and was not sorry for the chance of a chat with his old gardener. Nancy came forward and dusted an already spotless chair for

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him to sit on, old Joe was ensconced in his favourite wooden chair by the fire-place. Nancy had changed greatly during the months she had been at home, she scarcely looked the same woman, her eyes were still faded and her hair was grey and her poor hands crooked and wrinkled, it is true, but her expression was cheerful and contented, and a decent, comely air of well-being pervaded her whole person. Her face beamed with happiness when she saw Targett come inside.

"Well, Joe, and how are the rheumatics? Unusual weather for August, isn't it? But we had a glorious summer and should not grumble, the flowers did very well and this rain ought to keep things fresh and green a bit longer. And how are you, Mrs. Pickers, and how is Joey?"

"I'm proud to see you, here, sir, and glad to have a talk with you. It's a long time since you were here last, sure-ly? I'm fair done up after my day's work and glad to get a seat; at my age gardening is no light job."

"Well, you've got your daughter to wait on you, and little Joey to talk to—by the way, where is he? I have not seen him for some time."

"Joey can go fine on his crutches, now, sir," replied Nancy quickly, before her father could get a word in edgeways, "he goes to the village school; he's got a rare fancy for book-learning and is that quick and clever he can read almost anything at sight. The master at the school takes a sight of notice of him and every afternoon he stops on, after lessons, to do more learning. He wants to be a scholar, sir."

"I am glad to hear such good accounts of Joey, we'll all live to be proud of him, I'm sure."

"Nancy's tongue's for ever a-clapping, clapping," put in

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old Joe irritably, "it's nothing but gabble, gabble morning and night. Well, sir, what she says is true, the boy's a rare clever youngster, and can read his Bible like a parson. Nancy, lay the cloth and get Mr. Targett a cup o' tea, and a slice of bread and honey; 'tis raining heavy and not likely to stop for half an hour at least. And what do you hear of Master George, sir? he's a fine boy, yon, a fine upstanding ——"

"Father, you're talking o' Master George, you didn't ought to call him a boy, and him as clever a doctor as ever stepped! I hope he's well, sir?"

"Nancy, will ye stop chattering and get the tea?" She gave her old father a smile and a loving look as she left the room to fill the kettle from the spring. Old Joe lowered his voice:—

"She is a rare good girl is Nancy, and can get through more work than ten ordinary wummin, but bless you, sir, it's nothing but chatter, chatter, morn an' night, I can hardly hear myself speak," the old man gave a quiet chuckle; "but it's a real home life, now, Mr. Targett. To hear a woman's tongue about a house and pots and pans a-banging, an' tea-cups rattling, gives a place a feeling of home. When there's no wummin-folk about, it's as quiet as a graveyard. Eh, but I'm glad to have my Nancy and my Joey about me."

Nancy had re-entered and commenced laying a spotless cloth on the deal table.

"And how is Master George, sir?" she asked, guessing that Nathaniel had not had a chance of speaking since she left the room.

"He is quite well, but working very hard in London, and is going to take a holiday soon. He thought of going to Normandy, and, as you may remember, Joe, I thought

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of going with him, but I have changed my mind and I am not going away this year, after all ——”

“Why don’t ’ee bring Master George down here?” interrupted Joe, who thought he had been silent long enough. “It’s lonely for an old man when all his folks is away from him, and the country air ’ll do Master George a power of good. I don’t believe in them foreign parts, get him down to Dane Hill, sir, and it’ll do him more good than all the Bormandies ——”

“Normandy,” gently corrected Nathaniel, smiling.

“Normandies or Bormandies, it’s all one. Get him down here to the country and feed him up, sir, and give him plenty o’ good fresh milk to drink. You should just see the difference it’s made in Joey—the boy was skin and bone when he came from Lunnon, and now, bless you, he’s as plump as a little partridge, and his crutches they goes clickety-click, clickety-click, till they make almost as much noise as his mother’s tongue. Aye, but it does my heart good to hear them crutches, and to see his face, all rosy and happy ——”

“Will you have a cup of tea, sir?” interrupted Nancy.

“I see the rain is almost over, so I must be off as quickly as I can, but since you have made the tea, I’ll take a cup with pleasure.”

While he drank the tea, old Joe continued his garrulous, rambling conversation, but Nancy insisted on getting in a sentence now and again.

As Nathaniel stood up to go, Nancy handed him a still dripping umbrella and old Joe repeated: “Now don’t ’ee let Master George go to them foreign parts, sir; bring him down here and give him plenty of food and milk. I’ll be rare glad to see him again, a fine boy, a fine young gentleman he is, an’ no mistake. Well, must you go, sir? It’s

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rare pleased we've been to see you, and thank 'ee kindly for all you do for me and mine. I'm an old man and can't say much, but thank 'ee kindly, sir."

As Nathaniel walked home over the muddy, sloppy roads, the fresh breeze seemed to sweep away the cloud that had been hanging over him for the past month.

"I'll tell the boy everything—it's worth it. He is young and his eyes may see what mine cannot. I shall bind him to secrecy, and I know that, loving Margery as he does, he'll do all in his power to help me. The two claimants are coming to call on me to-morrow, I must put them off on some excuse for a week or so, and discuss the matter thoroughly with George."

CHAPTER XVII

PUNCTUALLY on the 8th of August, Mactarvish took Bulbul with him to interview Nathaniel Targett, who received them with smiling affability, but told them plainly that Sir Alec totally denied their claims, and that, if he heard anything further of the matter, he would immediately stop the allowance he had previously been making.

"Now, *what* are you *going* to do?" asked Bulbul, nervously cracking his fingers, an old native habit he always resorted to in moments of excitement.

"Now, see you here, Mr. Targett," said Mactarvish, taking no notice of Bulbul's question; "is this all that Sir Alec has to say, after waiting a whole month to think it over?"

"That is all that I am authorised by Sir Alec to tell you."

"Well, it won't suit me, I'm hanged if it will. There's money enough left, and I'm going to law. I'm away to London this very day to see another lawyer. You will have to sing small enough yet, my fine birds. Why has Sir Alec been paying this £500 a year to Bulbul's family, tell me that, Mr. Targett? You'll find it rather difficult to explain that circumstance to a judge—sounds uncommonly like hush money, don't it?"

Mactarvish's harsh voice was bullying and aggressive.

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"You are at liberty to take what steps you like, Mr. Mactarvish. No doubt Mr. Farraday, as he calls himself, will not mind spending every farthing of his money in a useless lawsuit—that is your business, not mine. At the same time, I have to inform you, Mr.—eh—er—Farraday, that Sir Alec has sent you a personal message. For the sake of his old friendship with your father, he wishes to spare you as much as possible. He will give you another fortnight or three weeks in which to fully consider the matter, and if, at the end of that time, you recognise your mistake and retract all the assertions you have made regarding Sir Alec, and return to India, he is willing to continue the annuity of £500 a year and to settle this sum on you and your heirs for ever—do you understand?"

Bulbul's face lighted up eagerly.

"I—I shall be ——"

"You'll jolly well keep your blooming mouth shut," said Mactarvish, pushing his heavy, hairy fist in the young man's face and glaring at him.

"There is time for you, in which to think matters over, Mr.—Farraday—do not do anything on the spur of the moment. Take your time, you can see me any morning, if you care to make an appointment."

"Come along out of this," said Mactarvish, and under the baleful influence of his eyes, poor Bulbul shuffled sadly out of the office, closely followed and watched by his brother-in-law.

Once outside, James Mactarvish let loose the vials of his wrath on Bulbul's head, he abused him by every foul expletive that came into his head, and wound up by threatening to break every bone in his body if he did not obey his instructions implicitly.

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"What—what do you want me to do?" asked the poor boy, his eyes starting out of his head, his teeth chattering with fear.

"I'm going away to London, I'm going to see a real proper lawyer, no more of your shilly-shallying darned rotters for me. Now, just you hand over £10 to me for expenses, and don't you dare to say a word to Aggie that you've given me any money. Then just you take your Bible oath you'll never go near old Targett while I'm away. If you break your word, my sonny, I'll do for you, and for Nettie too, when I come back."

Bulbul meekly gave the required promise, and also handed him the money for his journey; and that evening his brother-in-law departed for London, leaving his relatives feeling as if they had an unexpected and delightful holiday.

When George received Nathaniel's letter, his first feeling had been one of amazement. His uncle gave no clue as to the nature of the trouble that was worrying Sir Alec, but merely stated the fact, together with the gracious permission accorded by the baronet to the young man to visit Farraday Hall once more. As has already been said, he lost no time in making up his mind to abandon his trip to Normandy, and to spend his month's vacation in the country with his uncle.

An unexpected run of cases delayed him, and it was not until the 10th of August that he managed to get away, having arranged with Dr. Richardson that he would not return until the middle of September. A year had gone by since he had fallen in love with Margery, and as he drove Lena from the station to the Lodge he remembered the afternoon they had spent in Ashdown

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Forest and the gipsy's prophecy. He remarked that a good bit of it had come true, and his spirits rose as he reflected that the conclusion was in a fair way of being fulfilled too. He walked straight into Nathaniel's private room ; his uncle was out, but seated at the table he saw Sir Alec, who rose and held out his hand, saying cordially:—

“ I am glad to see you back again, George ; your uncle told me you were expected. I suppose he informed you of the men who have turned up from India as claimants of the Farraday estate ? ”

“ No, he told me nothing of them, he merely mentioned that you had some trouble worrying you. But what a preposterous idea ! Claimants for the Farraday estate ! I never heard of such a thing in my life.”

The heartfelt expression of astonishment and incredulity in his voice was very soothing to Sir Alec.

“ It's all over the village, George, and one of the men has gone to London to consult another lawyer. They have a marriage certificate on which they pin their hopes. Lady Mary knows nothing about it, and I don't wish the subject discussed at the Hall. I am afraid they mean to go to law, and although I have no fear of the ultimate issue, I should very much prefer if things could be settled out of court.” Sir Alec's voice was not as hopeful as his words.

“ You may be sure, Sir Alec, that my uncle will do his level best for you and your interests. I trust Lady Mary and—and Miss Margery are well ? ”

“ Yes, thank you, although my poor wife has not really got over Tot's death yet—my little baby ! She was very fond of you, eh, George ? Pordgee, she used to call you.

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Well, well, what changes time brings. We shall be glad to see you at the Hall, George, any time you care to call."

"Thank you, Sir Alec, but I must not accept your hospitality under false pretences. I still love Mar—Miss Margery, and I have never relinquished my hope of making her my wife. I cannot come to your house and meet her without—making love to her."

"As I said before, George, time brings many changes. I do not forbid you to make love to my daughter, but I will not promise anything definite yet; be satisfied with that—and give me time. I suppose I must get used to the idea, give me time, George. When this wretched business is cleared up, ask me again, I shall feel quite a different man once this affair is satisfactorily settled."

George noticed, as he was speaking, the changes that the last few months had wrought in his appearance. The brown hair was completely silvered, the light moustache was almost white, the clear, ruddy face was lined and haggard, and the colour faded from the blue eyes. Sir Alec had become an old man.

His carriage, though, was as upright and as dignified as of old, and George observed a firm, obstinate setting to his mouth that trouble and advancing years did but accentuate. The baronet presented a fine manly figure to the world, and would die fighting, if need be. George's heart and sympathy went out to him—waging such a bitter war with fate in his old age and bearing such a brave and gallant front through it all.

Nathaniel had not returned when Sir Alec rose to go.

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"If I may, I will call this afternoon, about tea-time," said George.

"By all means; I know my wife—and Miss Margery—will be glad to see you again," and with a kindly twinkle in his eyes Sir Alec shook hands with George, and mounting his horse, which was waiting outside, rode off.

When they had finished luncheon, and Mrs. Packer had cleared away, leaving them to their cigars, Nathaniel heard all the details of the morning's interview with Sir Alec, and that he had practically withdrawn his opposition to George's suit.

"Do you know, George, I am about to commit a serious breach of trust. I want your help and advice, dear boy, and as you are, or will be, one of Sir Alec's family, I am going to tell you what I vowed I would never reveal. Do you think my action justifiable?"

"Certainly. I'm as safe as a rock, Nunc, you can depend on me. I'll never breathe to a mortal soul that you've confided in me."

"You must not even tell Margery—now, or when she is your wife."

"All right," answered George, flushing and smiling.

Nathaniel thereupon told his nephew the story that Sir Alec had confided to him, giving him all the details as he had heard them.

"So Sir Alec is not really a Farraday at all," remarked the young man musingly; "this is not such a simple business as it looks at first sight."

"Simple? It's a complicated tangle all through. But, for goodness sake, don't ever even let fall a hint that I have told you Sir Alec's real history. I only made up

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my mind to do so the other day when I could see no possible solution to the trouble. The poor man is worried to death, though he tries not to show it, and it will go hard with him if these people go to law. Sir Alec, above all, must never know that you even suspect how things really stand—but I had to tell you, George; I saw no other alternative.”

“Don’t worry, Nunc; neither Sir Alec nor any other person shall ever suspect I know a word of the matter. You can depend on me and on my discretion. Now, while you have a nap I’ll stroll round the garden and see how your flowers are coming on. If I can think of or suggest a way out of this difficulty for Sir Alec I will let you know.”

They were both lying back in easy-chairs smoking, and, as was his invariable custom, Nathaniel pulled the newspaper over his head in preparation for his forty winks.

“All right, my boy, just think it over carefully,” said his uncle’s drowsy voice. “I am sure with your young brains you’ll quickly get at some good solution of the puzzle.”

George smiled in answer, and in less than five minutes his uncle’s gentle, regular snoring told him that the old man had dropped off to sleep. He got up, went softly out of the room, and walked up and down the garden for over an hour, his brows knitted in thought.

At length his face cleared and he gave a short laugh, “I think that will do—I fancy I’ve hit it.”

On returning to the house he found that Nathaniel was awake, and was his energetic, cheerful self once more.

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"Come along to your private room, Nunc, for half an hour, and I'll tell you the only conclusion I can come to. After that, I've done enough work for one day, I think, and I must be off. I promised to call at the Hall this afternoon."

George's voice was gay, his face beaming, Nathaniel looked at him in surprise.

"You look as if you had come in for a fortune, boy," he said, rubbing his eye-glasses and chuckling softly. He loved to hear the happy lilt in his nephew's voice, it made life seem brighter and happier again, almost a year had gone by since Nathaniel had last heard it, and his heart warmed within him.

"Not a fortune, Nunc dear, but a girl—my girl, Margery."

"What nonsense is the boy babbling!"

"Yes, I am premature. I should have said that my happy thoughts had jumped ahead, and that in imagination Sir Alec had graciously handed Margery over to me, with his blessing."

"I always told you that you aspired too high. I restrained myself from reminding you of the fact before, but since you are gloating over some very problematic happiness in the future, I may as well bring to your remembrance that I always told you that Sir Alec was most unlikely to hand his daughter over to you with his blessing."

"All right, Nunc dear, let us leave the matter for a few weeks in abeyance. After that we'll see who is right, you or I," said George, as they sat down at the table in Nathaniel's private office. "Now, as regards this case of yours—Farraday *versus* Farraday. You have told me very concisely the exact facts as the present Sir Alec told

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them to you. What you are looking for is a representation of facts that will meet that marriage certificate and look feasible to any wooden-headed claimant, or even to a judge if the matter were taken to court. I've got a splendid idea, Uncle, and it meets the case all round. Cast your mind back to that point in your story where the real Alec Farraday goes away to Chinsurah in hiding from the Marwari—he was already acquainted with the present Sir Alec, and had not then married his native wife. Your defence is this—that during this period Alec Farraday and Fred Carvill changed names. The motive for the action is clear—the threats uttered by the native money-lender, the Marwari. You follow me? It works out well—Fred Carvill (so you will say), under the name of Alec Farraday, lies in hiding at Chinsurah and marries the native girl, Leila Singh; while Alec Farraday, under the name of Fred Carvill, knocks about trying to get employment. When they were both working at Bally, where Mactarvish met them, Carvill was Farraday and *vice versa*. You still follow me? Now, to follow out the story—when news of the fortune reached Carvill—living in Calcutta with his wife, under the name of Farraday—he immediately sends word to his friend, living under the name of Carvill in Assam. They meet, and Alec Farraday *resumes* his own name, comes to England and claims his inheritance; while Carvill, changing his name again to Murray, retires to Mhudapur, and dies there. How does this explanation strike you?”

“It is excellent. A really brilliant idea. I congratulate you, my boy, I really do. How,—how can we prove this story?”

“Very easily. You say there is a diary kept by the real Alec Farraday and given to our Sir Alec as a guide—

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let him doctor the diary to suit the event. Just insert cleverly a few pages and write fully the account of the change of names, with the motive for doing so."

"That will certainly be a most natural and complete solution to the difficulty. It will need to be very carefully done, of course, and by Sir Alec himself, as his writing is a facsimile of the dead Alec Farraday's. At any rate I may be able to prevent a law-suit. I shall use this explanation you have so cleverly concocted as a lever to the men from India, to bluff them into relinquishing their claim."

"I am going to call at the Hall this afternoon, are you coming too, Nunc?"

"Yes, certainly. I want a long talk with Sir Alec, and we must go over the diary carefully together. I will write to the little dark man, who is really the true Thomas Farraday. I should like to see him and talk him over before his evil-genius Mactarvish returns from London."

"Well, when you are up at the Hall this afternoon mind you buttonhole Sir Alec, carry him off and engage him in conversation. If you have any feeling for me you will keep the old boy busy till midnight, it will be my first talk with Margery since Christmas."

Nathaniel laughed.

"Happy is the wooing that is not long a-doing," he quoted, "and I can only hope that your courtship will end more happily this time than it did last."

"It will end happily for me, you may bet your bottom dollar, Nunc; but whether my marriage takes place with Sir Alec's consent or without it depends entirely on himself."

George dressed himself with special care that afternoon,

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he changed his tie six times before he was satisfied with the effect produced.

He went alone to Farraday Hall, Nathaniel saying he would turn up a little later.

Lady Mary was having tea on the West Terrace with Margery, Frizzie and all the children around her when he appeared. Cicely and Alec rushed forward to greet him as he came in view and threw themselves upon him in delight.

"Oh Porgee! It's Porgee! What ages since we've seen you!" and Cicely gave his arm a loving squeeze, that also served to convey to him that she quite remembered their last meeting in the church. Alec clung to his other hand and Jackie's shrill little falsetto announced:—

"Why, Mummie, here's Porgee come back".

The children's name for George threw Lady Mary's sad thoughts back to her lost baby.

"She always loved Porgee," she said softly as she gave him her hand, her eyes misty with tears.

Margery was very pale and her eyes were also misty, but with different emotions, as George held her hand for fully a minute while he gazed into her face.

"Did not Sir Alec tell you to expect me?" he asked, as he sat on the third part of a chair, shared by Alec and Jackie.

"Yes; he mentioned at luncheon that you might be coming this afternoon, but he could not say at what hour you would turn up. He had to go out, old Lord Duds-worth sent him an urgent message, some trouble about Jim, I fancy, and Tom has driven him over in the dog-cart. They hope to be back in time for dinner. Sir Alec left a message for you, and asked me to invite Mr.

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Targett and yourself to remain and have dinner with us; I hope you will do so, George."

Lady Mary smiled very kindly at the young man; he was almost as dear to her as her own children, and she had long ago dropped the more formal Mr. Targett and called him George.

"Oh isn't this like old times? I feel quite jolly again," said Cicely, and George noticed that she had grown tall and reedy, and was much paler and more subdued than when he first met her, a year ago.

"I'm at Eton," proudly announced Alec; "I'm captain of the third form eleven; I'm not a beastly kid any longer."

"Oh Alec! What language!" but Frizzie's meek voice was scarcely heard.

"I'm not a beathly kid," lisped Jackie; "I'm a big boy, I'm going to Ethon too."

"You'll have to learn to talk, first, Jackie, they'll rag the life out of you if you lisp in school."

Alec gave himself superior airs, befitting a youth of twelve summers who could smoke a whole cigarette without being sick more than twice.

"I don't lipth, I talk very nithely," said Jackie with indignation.

"If you children have finished your tea," remarked Cicely severely, "you'd better run away and play. We want to talk to Pordgee."

Alec had pitched his wickets on one of the open, grassy spaces beyond the cultivated garden, where he gave lessons in batting and fancy bowling to Jackie, the stable boys, the under-gardeners, old Tomkins, and any one who cared to learn. Thither the boys repaired; Alec looking very grown up and manly in his cricket rig-out.

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"You have not had a chance to speak yet, George, will you be able to stop to dinner?"

"With great pleasure, Lady Mary. My uncle wishes to see Sir Alec on business matters, so I know he will be pleased to do so, as well."

"Have you come down for long?" asked Margery's soft voice. She had not been able to speak before owing to the rapid and irregular behaviour of her heart, and had thankfully screened her silence behind the noisy welcome of the children.

"About a month. I was going to Normandy, but as Nunc backed out of it at the last minute I changed my mind, and have come down to keep the old man company, and recruit my shattered health in the country."

"Quite right," said Lady Mary, who had been kept in total ignorance of the arrival of the two claimants to the Farraday estate. "I am sure that the country, especially Dane Hill, will do you more good than Normandy. I was so pleased when my husband told us that you were here, and that he had invited you to call on us. I trust, George, that happier days will soon be dawning for us all." Lady Mary's look expressed even more than her words, kindly though they were.

They sat and chatted for a long while, George privately longing for Nathaniel to put in an appearance, as then he might get a chance of a few minutes alone with Margery, but the afternoon had nearly faded away into the soft pink glow of sunset before the old man appeared, ready dressed for dinner.

"Sir Alec left a note asking us both to dinner," remarked Nathaniel, after greeting the ladies. "So, my boy, off you go and change. Lena is waiting for you." As he went off George could have sworn at having lost his only

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chance of seeing Margery in private before her father returned. Lena took him back to Dane Hill Lodge at a swinging trot, and he made up his mind that by some means or other he would find an opportunity of a stolen meeting with his little sweetheart that evening, even under Sir Alec's nose.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE party round Sir Alec's dinner-table that evening was a very merry one. For some months past Margery and Tom had been depressed, at first by Lady Mary's excessive grief for Tots, and latterly by their father's trouble over Thomas Farraday and James Mactarvish.

An electric current of happiness and goodwill ran through the company, the young people seemed to be bubbling over with high spirits. George had found time and opportunity to catch Margery in his arms for a brief second, and her cheeks and eyes bore witness of the fact. Sir Alec alone was moody and pre-occupied. He roused himself as a peal of laughter caught his ear, and glanced round the table. He was quite startled at the change in his wife and Margery. Lady Mary had arranged some white lace over the bosom of her black dress, and, as Sir Alec looked at her, she was laughing with the others at one of Tom's silly jokes, he noticed that her face had lost the usual drawn look of pain, and she seemed really happy for the first time since little Tots's death. Margery was radiant with love and renewed hope; her cheeks were glowing like damask roses, her eyes shining like stars. Sir Alec gave an impatient sigh, he wondered what these two charming and beautiful women could see in this very ordinary young man to cause such a change in their spirits

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and appearance. He owned to himself that he had played a losing game, and that it was now time he gave in.

"I'd better yield with a good grace," he thought; "it's no use fighting against fate—Margery evidently loves him as much as ever—I must make up my mind to accept George as a son-in-law."

His meditations were interrupted by Lady Mary addressing him across the table.

"Alec dear, what did Lord Dudsworth want with you this afternoon?"

Sir Alec gave another impatient sigh, the question reminded him of a past hope, now dead and buried for ever.

"Lord Charles is worried; Jim has got into another scrape and the old man wanted my advice."

Tom gave a hearty laugh.

"Do you know what every one is saying about Jim?"

"Don't repeat any scandal, Tom dear, especially before your sisters. There are many tales being circulated about Jim. Although I don't like him personally, I am sure that all the stories that we hear about him cannot be true."

Lady Mary had an old-fashioned habit of defending the absent—even her enemies.

"Unfortunately this last bit of news is true, and I am at liberty to announce to you that Jim is married. He has married very much beneath his own class of life. Lord Charles is broken-hearted over him; he has been giving him trouble in all directions. But I do not wish any tales of Jim's wildness repeated at the dinner-table, Tom."

Sir Alec gave his son a severe look which did not appear

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to impress the young man to any extent. He gave his father a profound wink and muttered soothingly :—

“ All right, dad, we’ll keep it till after dinner”.

Sir Alec tried to hope that he was keeping Tom in his place, and acting the severe father, but in his heart there was a lurking conviction that he was a very weak disciplinarian.

The news of Jim’s marriage caused a babble of chatter, and Sir Alec continued his dinner in silence.

When Lady Mary rose she told the men not to sit too long over their cigars, as Cicely wanted to have some music before she went to bed. After the ladies had left the room Tom eagerly began his story.

“ Dad, do listen to this yarn about Jim—its killing ; I roared when I heard it, and the funniest part of it all is that it’s perfectly true. It seems for the past month or so Jim was mashing Rosie Marsh, a waitress at the new Dudsworth tea-rooms ; her mother is the proprietress, a widow lady of mature charms, with a giddy, coquettish manner. Jim was quite smitten with the fair Rosie, arranged to bolt with her, and brought his motor round one night about ten. A lady got in—Jim addressed her as darling Rosie, and off they went. The lady was muffled up in a huge motor wrap and cap and veil. When they got to East Grinstead, where Jim had booked rooms at one of the hotels, who should it turn out to be but Mamma Marsh ! —very loving and very sentimental. Jim got into a towering rage, and cursed and swore like a trooper, there was a frightful scene at the hotel, and the giddy widow flung her arms round his neck and wept on his shirt front. When he pushed her off, she got nasty, and said she’d have him up for breach of promise and all that sort of thing. She raised Cain properly, I can tell

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you, and she had the whole hotel as her audience. Jim bolted in his motor, and left poor Mamma Marsh to find her lonely way back to Dudsworth. I don't know when I laughed so much, it's just like Jim Dudsworth; just the silly sort of scrape he'd be bound to get into, and only what he could expect from that class of woman. He's an ass for having anything to do with such rotters."

"And what's the upshot of the adventure? Which of the ladies has he married?" asked Nathaniel.

"I believe I can finish the story," said Sir Alec. "It is no secret, the whole place knows it. Jim has married Rosie Marsh, and her mother, as his mother-in-law, has been persuaded to drop proceedings. Lord Charles is very upset about everything, as Mrs. Marsh is living just outside the Court gates, and is making herself officious and objectionable in every way. That is not all—there are other troubles. Poor Lord Charles! I don't envy him, he is completely broken down and embittered by Jim's conduct."

"Can you spare me an hour, Sir Alec? I have a matter of business I should like to discuss with you," said Nathaniel.

"With pleasure, Targett. I'm a bit fagged by the long drive to Dudsworth Court and back, but I shall be glad to talk over affairs with you."

"How awfully keen you are on business, Mr. Targett," laughed Tom; "I'm hanged if I'd worry about anything of that sort after dinner. Come on, George old man, let's leave the Governor and Mr. Targett to finish their wine and their discussions, and we'll join the Mater and have some music."

Tom put his arm through George's, who waited for no second bidding, and a comprehensive twinkle came into

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Sir Alec's eyes at the alacrity with which he jumped up and threw away the larger half of a very excellent cigar. Tom joined Margery and Cicely at the piano, and George sat beside Lady Mary, who was waiting for Frizzie to arrange the cards for a game of double dummy bridge.

"Lady Mary," he said in a low tone, "do help me. I am longing for an opportunity to have a talk with Margery alone. I have not seen her to speak to since Christmas—if you could only help me."

His voice and eyes were eloquent and beseeching. Lady Mary smiled.

"You take a good deal for granted, George; you seem to count me on your side?"

"Of course I do," said George; "are you not her mother?"

"You are a very confident boy," she answered, giving his arm a loving pat, "well, go to the library and hunt for a book and I'll send Margery to help you find it."

George gave her hand a grateful squeeze and left the room as Frizzie entered with the cards and bridge markers.

"Margery dear," said Lady Mary after a few minutes, "please go to the library and see if you can find the new book of bridge rules; it's a green book covered with brown paper."

"Hurry back, Marnie," called Tom, as he tuned up his banjo; "we want you to turn over, and help us in the songs."

"I am afraid," thought Lady Mary, smiling to herself as she dealt the cards, "that you will have to wait."

Margery went slowly down the corridor towards the library. Needless to say she was thinking of George.

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"I wonder why he rushed away from the drawing-room? Perhaps he has gone to talk to Daddy."

She opened the library door and a pair of arms folded round her and drew her into the friendly gloom of the room.

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, as she felt his lips on hers. His arms tightened round her and held her fast, and his kisses took her breath away.

They stood there for some minutes, quite lost to everything but themselves.

"George dear, Mummie sent me for a book," and Margery tried to disengage herself from his arms.

"That's all right, sweetheart; she invented the book to give me a chance of seeing you alone for a few minutes."

The room was lit by a single lamp, turned very low, with a green shade over it, and in the dim light George thought he had never seen Margery look so lovely, her face pale with emotion, her lips carmine from the fire of his kisses.

"Margery love—how beautiful you are—you look so perfectly divine to-night that I can hardly realise that you love me—a commonplace fellow like I am."

"I am only pretty because you love me," whispered the girl; "it is your love that makes me look nice. See, I am your own little Margery," and she put her arms round his neck.

They found a large roomy chair, and the rest of their conversation and doings were unintelligible and uninteresting to the outside world. Time slipped away unheeded, as it always does under such circumstances. At last Margery awoke to the fact that she had been a few minutes longer than was necessary to look for a book. After a further interval she reluctantly dragged herself

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back to every-day life and away from her lover's arms. When she entered the drawing-room she was horrified to find that she had been away two hours. Lady Mary and Frizzie were still playing cards; Cicely had gone to bed, and Tom had vanished. She was still tingling with George's kisses and her mother's keen eyes soon remarked her flushed cheeks and dewy lips. A tender smile born of comprehension came over Lady Mary's face, and drawing Margery towards her, she kissed her lovingly, and told her to run away to bed.

The girl gladly obeyed and carried her palpitating little heart and burning cheeks to her cool white bed, and lying there in the friendly darkness she thrilled at the sweetness of remembered kisses and caresses.

When Lady Mary went to her room later, Margery was lying awake, her radiant hair hiding her shy eyes and straying over the pillow.

"What, Margery pet, not asleep yet?"

"Mummie, I can't sleep—I've been thinking—oh, Mummie darling, I'm so happy—he loves me so."

Lady Mary bent over the girl and clasped her in her arms, the flushed face nestling in her soft bosom.

"God bless you, dear, I am glad you are happy, pet. Now try and sleep, darling, or all these lovely roses will fade away," and she touched the velvet cheek gently with her fingers.

With her mother's blessing on her fair head, Margery fell asleep a few minutes later, her lips parted in a smile of absolute happiness.

The following day Bulbul received a letter from Nathaniel Targett. He was having tea with Nettie when the postman came, and the servant girl brought in the note.

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Not many letters came to Bulbul or Nettie, so she waited to see if he would open it before she left the room.

She was doomed to disappointment. Bulbul left it beside his plate.

"That will *do*, you can go away," said Nettie to the girl, who retired, banging the door with unnecessary vehemence.

"Is it from Jamie? Why don't you open the letter?" asked Nettie, pouring out a cup of tea. She was looking frightfully ill, her face thin to emaciation, her lips drawn and parched. When her loving husband had left her the week before, he had kindly informed her that she was as hideous as a brown baboon, and added that if the kid took after her in colour or shape he would bash the life out of it. Nettie had only smiled trustfully in answer. As long as she lived to hold her baby in her arms she felt she did not care what he said to her, and she thought his words were merely an idle threat.

Bulbul opened and read the letter.

"Mr. Targett *says* he want me to meet Sir Alec and *himself* at Farraidé Hall, to-morrow, at twelve o'clock," he announced.

"You will go, Bulbul, eh? Yes *of* course, you must go and see this Sir Alec."

"I told James—I swore, I would not see Mr. Targett while he was away in London," he replied, cracking his finger joints with nervousness.

"But this is different, Bulbul. You can say Sir Alec Farraidé wrote and you had to go. He wants to talk to you, Bulbul, and now, perhaps, we shall get something arranged."

"Yes, Nettie, that is true. Sir Alec must have something important to say to me. Yes, I will go, and I will

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tell James that Sir Alec Farraydé wrote to me and so I went to see him."

"I wish everything was ended," said the girl fretfully. "I do not want this Farraydé Hall, I want to get back to Mhudapur. I am tired of this cold, wet country; I do not like England."

"Then you will not be angry if I give up my claim?" asked Bulbul eagerly.

"I shall be glad. I never did want to come to this country, it was all Jamie's wish, not mine. I want to go back to India; that's all I care about."

Her lips trembled piteously as she looked out at the dreary wet autumn evening; poor girl, she had found little enough happiness in England. Bulbul felt very nervous as he walked up the long avenue to the Hall the next day. This was his first visit as an invited guest to the house he claimed as his own, for he had never had sufficient pluck to repeat the experiment he made on the first afternoon of his arrival. Poor Bulbul made a sorry figure as the legal claimant of Farraday Hall, his nervousness and inherent timidity prevented him from asserting himself in any way; James Mactarvish, on the other hand, could have portrayed the confident and braggart conspirator to the life.

Bulbul's glance, as it fell over the smooth lawns and beautifully laid out gardens, was not that of a would-be proprietor, he took no pride in the thought that his father and fore-fathers had owned the grand old Hall before him, he desired nothing better than to get the interview over, and to obtain as favourable terms as he could from Sir Alec. Bulbul hoped devoutly that the yearly money would not be stopped, he had no aptitude for work of any kind, the very idea of having to labour for his liveli-

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hood made him cold to his marrow bones. Vickers opened the door to him and took his hat and stick with such elaborate politeness that it had the effect of making Bulbul more nervous than ever. He thought he could see contempt and disdain written in every line of the footman's face.

"Mr. Thomas Farraday," Vickers announced in a tone that was as colourless as the expression of his well-trained features, on meeting Sir Alec's glance. "Farraday indeed! And him a-walking out with that there brazen-faced Aggie Packer. I like the impudence of him a-calling himself Mr. Farraday!"

Vickers found his suppressed indignation almost too strong for him.

Bulbul was shown into the library, a handsome but gloomy room, containing a fair collection of books and some very valuable old oak carvings. He shook hands with Nathaniel Targett, who introduced him to Sir Alec; after hesitating a second the young fellow held out his hand to the baronet, who took it, looking steadily and searchingly into his face for a likeness to his old friend. The resemblance was there, but a very faint one, owing to the Oriental type of Bulbul's features. This was the first time that Sir Alec had met the son of the dead Alec Farraday at close quarters; he had seen him in the distance, and had passed him while riding through the village, and he was relieved to find that a closer inspection of the young man brought him no uneasy doubts or qualms of conscience; on the contrary, he saw the wisdom of his dead friend's act of renunciation, and he quite agreed with him now, that it would never do for the half-caste children of Alec Farraday to inherit Farraday Hall.

Bulbul sat down uneasily and looked at each of them

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in turn. Nathaniel rose, and changed his position, sitting so as to obtain a full view of the young man's face, and in this manner slightly screening Sir Alec, who was seated somewhat in the background.

"Now, Mr. Farraday," said Nathaniel in his most official manner, "we will begin our business by informing you that this interview has been especially arranged by Sir Alec Farraday for your benefit. He wishes you to fully comprehend how matters stand. We have no desire to resort to harsh measures, unless it is unavoidable. You are the son of my client's old friend, and he wishes to treat you as kindly as possible. It is, however, only fair to warn you that he will not tolerate your claims, either to the Farraday name or estate."

"I am not very sorry; I do not like England, and we—Nettie and I—want to go back to India again."

Poor Bulbul, he gave himself away from the very beginning.

"Well, as that is the case, we can call this a friendly conversation, and I trust that all matters will be amicably settled. I am glad for your own sake that you are taking a sensible view of the situation. My client, Sir Alec Farraday, intends to deal very leniently and generously by you, so long as you agree to his terms."

Bulbul fidgeted nervously, he was cracking the joints of his fingers and looked ill at ease. There was obviously something on his mind. Nathaniel paused, and gave him time to speak.

"That is all right, Mr. Targett, I don't mind and Nettie doesn't mind; that is all right, we shall be glad to go away if we get any money, but—but—there is James—James Mactarvish; he is different, he has gone to London to see

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another lawyer; he will not go away, he will go to law."

"You are naturally alarmed about Mr. Mactarvish, I quite understand the position. Take it from me, Mr. Farraday, that you are following the right course, and that you will never be sorry if you are guided by Sir Alec's advice. You need not fear Mr. Mactarvish, we have sufficient proofs to convince him, and any lawyers he may appoint to examine our title deeds, that we have very certain grounds for assuming that Sir Alec is the only and the true possessor of the name and estate."

"That is all right," repeated the young man sadly; "but James—he—will not believe."

"Let me explain as far as I can the true position of affairs. I should like you to understand and be thoroughly convinced of the solidity of Sir Alec's position. Suppose you begin by placing your claim before us and telling us on what grounds it is based?"

Bulbul drew the marriage certificate out of his pocket book and handed it to Targett.

"My father married Leila Lingham, and I am their child," he said simply.

"Because your father married your mother under the name of Alec Farraday, you conclude that he was the heir to all the Farraday estates?"

Bulbul nodded his assent.

"Granted, then, that he was the true heir. He lived for ten years after Sir Alec, here, was in possession, why did he make no effort to regain his wealth and title during that time?"

"Perhaps," said the young man slowly, and a dull red flush mounted to his forehead, "perhaps—he was ashamed of my mother—and us."

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Sir Alec gave an imperceptible start, and covered his face with his hand.

"That is hardly a sufficient reason," went on Nathaniel in his calm, level voice. "If your father had been the legal possessor of so magnificent an estate, you may be sure that he would have claimed what belonged to him. Now what other grounds have you for supposing that your father was Alec Farraday?"

"James Mactarvish knew him years ago. James called him Alec Farraday."

"In your first interview with me, in my office, you made the same statement, Mr. Farraday; and you also said that when Mr. Mactarvish called your father Alec Farraday, *he denied that it was his name*. Mr. Mactarvish was present at the time, and you were both agreed on that point. Is this not true?"

"Yes, it is quite true. James knows, Nettie knows, that my father always said that he was not Alec Farraday."

"So far, so good. Have you any further reason for believing that your father was Alec Farraday?"

"My mother said," said Bulbul huskily—he always showed great tenderness when speaking of his mother—"she said that my father changed his name. She said he gave away everything to a man called Fred Carvill. That's all she told me, and she made us promise, Nettie and I, that we would be bound by our father's wishes. I have no other reason to believe that I am the heir to the propertee."

"Exactly. Then I find that you have three arguments for your assumption of the fact that your father was the legal owner of these estates. The first is based on the

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ground that your father married, and you were christened under the name of Farraday; the second is that Mr. Mac-tarvish knew your father under that name at one period of his life, years before you were born; and the third is that your mother told you that he had changed his name and given away his property. Is this correct?"

Again Bulbul nodded his assent.

"Well," and Nathaniel took up a bulky manuscript, lying on the table before him, "the mistake was really a natural one; but you should have made inquiries before you jumped to any conclusions. I will explain all the circumstances to you as fully as I can. Your father and Sir Alec here were young men together in India—both Englishmen, both very poor. They became friends, let us call them A and B—understanding that Sir Alec here is A and that your dead father is B. Keep that in your mind. A and B were friends. B got into debt and trouble, he was in fear of his life (that was your father remember), and A came forward, told him to take his name for a short time till things blew over and everything was put straight again. That is to say, your father got into trouble and Sir Alec lent him his name to shield him during this period. They parted, having with mutual consent changed Farraday for Carvill and Carvill for Farraday. This is how your mistake arose, for your father lived and married under his friend's name. Now, when the news reached India that Alec Farraday had succeeded to the title and estates—what happens? If there had been no change of names, and if your father had been the true Alec Farraday, he would have proceeded straight to England to claim his inheritance. Instead of which he communicated with his friend, who was away from Calcutta, and told him the news.

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Ah! you understand now? Well, this friend, who was, of course, the real Alec Farraday, and heir to everything, hastened to Calcutta and from thence sailed to England, where he proved his claim to the title and estate. In memory of his affection for the man who had borne his name, and who was poor and in bad health, Sir Alec settled on him a secure income for life. The other man, your father, my dear young gentleman, was Fred Carvill, who went to Mhudapur under the name of Alec Murray, and who lived and died there. Are you quite satisfied?"

"Then my name is not Farraidé, and not Murray," said Bulbul, "I am really Thomas Carvill."

Sir Alec gave a short exclamation which was covered by Nathaniel's voice saying:—

"Precisely. But since your father, for reasons of his own, dropped the name of Carvill and took that of Murray we think the best thing you can do is to stick to the latter, especially as you are known under that name in Mhudapur. My client, Sir Alec Farraday, is willing to treat you very generously. He will give Mr. Thomas Murray the sum of £500 cash down, to pay his return fare to India, and will settle £500 a year on him and on his heirs, provided he drops the absurd claim to the Farraday estate and name, and agrees to reside in India. Should these conditions be broken at any time, the money will immediately cease. You must understand the reason of his generosity Mr.—er—er Murray;—he was very fond of your father and believes that you acted in good faith and not through malice."

Bulbul stood up, his dark eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Thank you very much indeed, Sir Alec, you are very

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kind. I agree to everything, and I thank you very much for your kindness to me. I am engaged to be married, and the lady wants to go back to India with me, she will be so very glad, and so will Nettie."

"Who is the lady you are going to marry?" asked Sir Alec kindly, "any one we know?"

"Oh, yes, her name is Aggie—Miss Packer," Bulbul spoke with dignity.

"What, Aggie Packer!" exclaimed Sir Alec. "Well, I congratulate you, she is a good sensible girl and will make you a splendid wife, I am sure. You must be married here and take her as your wife to India. Lady Mary will give Aggie her trousseau as a wedding present."

"Oh, thank you, Sir Alec, thank you very much," said Bulbul; "and there is something else I want to ask you. Please let Aggie have all the money you are going to give me, then James cannot take it; she is not afraid of James. And, please, will some one else tell James about—about my name being really Carvill and not *Farrayde*? He is such a big man, and he is so bad tempered, and I—I—I would rather not tell him."

"That will be all right, Mr. Murray," said Nathaniel. "When Mr. Mactarvish arrives from London, send him to see me, and I will explain matters fully to him. It is a very wise suggestion of yours that the money should be in Aggie's hands. We have known her from her childhood and have full confidence in her common sense. She will look after it for you, and she will not allow Mr. Mactarvish to have the handling of it."

"Thank you very much indeed for all your kindness," said Bulbul, shaking hands all round; "I cannot thank you all enough."

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"Thomas Murray is a thorough little gentleman," said Nathaniel after he had gone.

"Yes," and the tears stood in Sir Alec's blue eyes. "In some ways he reminds me of his father, and he was the truest gentleman and the best man I ever knew."

CHAPTER XIX

JAMES MACTARVISH returned from London as unexpectedly as he had gone there. One morning, a few days later, Bulbul went home after seeing Aggie as far as Dane Hill Lodge, whither she had gone to visit her aunt, and found Mactarvish established once more in their little parlour in the Hoadley's cottage. With him was a stranger, whom he introduced as, "Mr. Smithson, a darned clever lawyer from London".

All the happiness faded from Bulbul's face when he saw the burly form of his brother-in-law filling up the little room.

"Hello! Here's the wandering minstrel! What's all the news, Sonny? I have not seen Netty as yet."

Mactarvish was slightly hilarious, he had started the day with sundry nips of his favourite beverage.

"So you have returned James," was Bulbul's not over-enthusiastic greeting.

"Yes, my pet-lamb, your loving brother has come home again, to look after you. You have a guilty look, Sonny, don't tell me you've broken your Bible oath and been to see that measly toad Targett?"

"No, no, James, I have not, I have not indeed. Do not be angry. I have seen Sir Alec Farraday, but Mr. Targett told me to tell you to call at his office."

"Hello! What's all this now? How could that blasted

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fool Targett tell you anything if you had not been to see him,—tell me that ?” and Mactarvish banged his heavy fist on the table as he glared at the shivering and cowering Bulbul.

“Do not be so wild, James ; I have not been to see Mr. Targett. I had a letter, and—and I called on Sir Alec, but—but—you had better go to Mr. Targett and he will explain everything to you.”

“Humph ! It sounds suspicious—but I can tackle the lot of them ;—it’ll take them all their time to get the best of me. You’d better come along with me, Mr. Smithson ; you’ve come down here to earn money, and you’d better start about it at once.”

“Very well, Mr. Mactarvish, I will accompany you to see this country lawyer. It is always as well to have a witness in your dealings with this class of person.”

He spoke to Mactarvish, not taking the slightest notice of Bulbul, whom he considered of no account in the matter, and the poor boy was only too thankful to see them depart.

Mactarvish, putting his arm familiarly through that of Smithson, walked with him to Nathaniel Targett’s house. The solicitor was within and disengaged, and they were shown into his private office. Mactarvish introduced them and the lawyers nodded to each other. Nathaniel strongly suspected that Smithson was a low class pettifogging solicitor, only too eager to pick up any stray cases that came along.

Old Targett was courtesy itself, and rather threw both of them off their balance by the crushing politeness of his manner. Upon request, he repeated all the facts he had previously laid before Bulbul, and acquainted them with the latter’s entire belief and accordance with them. Both

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men raised several arguments, and asked many irrelevant questions, but Nathaniel's patience did not give way, and he quietly and fully answered every point they wished to know. Mr. Smithson was soon convinced that his client had not a leg to stand on, and was disgusted to think he had been dragged into a case where there seemed little chance of any profits. His chagrin was complete when Nathaniel remarked, in his most official manner :—

“I may as well inform you, Mr. Smithson, that your client, Mr. Mactarvish, has no funds at his disposal. The money so carefully saved by Mr. Thomas Murray in India has very nearly all been spent, he told me himself he had only a very small amount left. Not a penny is to be paid to Mr. Murray until he has definitely and absolutely dropped all pretensions to the Farraday name and estate, and even then all the money is to be banked in the name of, and paid into the hands of his future wife, Miss Packer.”

Mactarvish muttered a very forcible curse under his breath.

“Under these circumstances, Mr. Smithson, your client will be wise if he withdraws his claim, and with as little fuss as possible. I may add that if your fees for to-day have been paid in advance, you are lucky, otherwise I am afraid you will be badly off.”

Mr. Smithson was a cute gentleman. He quickly saw that he was on the losing side, and that Mactarvish had beguiled him down to this out-of-the-way village on false hopes. Targett's words revealed the bankrupt condition of Mactarvish's finances, and he made it a rule never to work for any one who had no ready cash.

“Well, I'm not going to waste my time here, Mr. Targett. Since the opposing parties have come to an amic-

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able settlement, there's nothing more to say. My client, Mr. Mactarvish, seems to have made a mistake regarding his position in this affair."

Thereupon Mr. Smithson lifted his hat from the table, courteously wished Nathaniel "Good-day" and strode out into the village street, followed by Mactarvish. A cold drizzle was falling, and chilled them through.

"Well, of the soppy, pudding-head idiots you fairly take the cake!" raged Smithson, who was in a fiery temper at his useless journey.

"Stow that!" growled Mactarvish, and a glance at his lowering face, and the ominous glare in his eyes, warned the little Londoner that he was a dangerous customer. It would go hard with the person on whom Mactarvish vented his passion that day.

"Well, it's no use crying over spilt milk," went on the lawyer, seeing that discretion was the better part of valour, and determined to be affable; "it's a pity your brother-in-law has given in, but it has saved you a lot of money. You could never have won your case, the other side hold all the cards. I'll be off back to London at once. I don't envy a gay spark like you being boxed up in this God-forsaken little hole. Is there any place handy where I can get a meal before I go back? Come along and have something with me, I'll stand treat."

"We'll have a tuck-in at the Dane Hill Arms—it's the only decent place in these d——d parts," Mactarvish's voice was less grumpy, but the scowl did not leave his face.

They had a good meal, and Smithson noticed that his friend still had a pocketful of loose coins and wished he had not been so generous. After he had finished he got a lift in one of the village carts to the station, and left

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Mactarvish still drinking heavily and regularly at the Dane Hill Arms.

The autumn day was drawing to a close. The rain had ceased and a faint whispering wind crept about like an uneasy spirit, breaking every now and then into turbulent little gusts.

Bulbul had been in the house all day, dreading the return of his brother-in-law, but as the hours passed by, and there were no signs of him, he made up his mind that he had returned to London with the lawyer, the wish being father to the thought, and quite forgetting that James was the last man to go to London without recouping his finances.

He asked Nettie if she would mind being left alone for an hour or so, adding that she need have no fear, as she had done nothing to vex her husband, and that all his anger would be directed on her poor brother's head, for having given in and accepted Sir Alec's terms.

"You had better go out, Bulbul; no, I am not afraid of Jamie; he will not hurt me just now, and I will get him to bed if he comes home very drunk."

His conscience not being quite clear, Bulbul kissed his sister lovingly, and then went to old Mrs. Hoadley, asking her to look after Nettie, especially if Jamie came in and gave any trouble. And having done all he thought necessary, he joyfully set out to find Aggie, and spend a blissful hour or two in her company.

Nettie wandered restlessly up and down the small garden, dreading to see Mactarvish's bulky form lounging along the road, and yet longing to get the first meeting over and the worst known. She knew, by bitter experience, that he could be as savage as a wild beast when he

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was roused, and only hoped that he had drunk sufficient to make his legs unsteady and his aim untrue.

Old Mrs. Hoadley stood for a few minutes talking to the girl and told her if her trouble came on during the night, to be sure and send for her, adding;—

“It looks to me as if it might be anytime now, and don’t ye fret, dearie, I’ll look after ye, and I’ve had plenty of experience, seeing I’ve nine living of my own, and two that died in their cradles. If that husband of yours gives you any sauce, just give me a call, I can easy hear you from my room, and I’ll send old Hoadley or one of the boys to settle him.”

The kind motherly woman cheered up the drooping girl, and returning to their little sitting-room she lit the lamp, trimmed the fire, and set the kettle on the hob.

“Maybe Aggie will come home with Bulbul and want a cup of tea, and if Aggie’s here Jamie won’t get a chance of hitting me.”

Her thoughts became more hopeful as she sat in the easy chair and looked dreamily into the glowing fire. Gradually her limbs relaxed and she dropped into an uneasy dose. A heavy lurching footstep crunching the gravel, and the fumbling at the outer door aroused her. She started up with a little cry, and as her husband burst into the room she realised with a sudden sick clutch at her heart that he was worse than he had ever been before; she thought she saw murder glaring from his bloodshot eyes.

“Jamie, Jamie,” she whispered, standing and stretching out her hands in piteous appeal.

Mactarvish had soaked himself pretty freely with whisky, but he was a hardened drinker, and the spirit had taken no effect on his legs and arms. He had nursed his

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wrath and disappointment until it was a seething white heat of rage. He had not spoken except to ask for liquor all the afternoon, as he sat drinking at the Arms; and with each drink he registered vows of vengeance against Bulbul and Nettie. He considered that he had been bitterly wronged, and the mere fact that the two of them had yielded without demur proved to his mind that they had gone over to the enemy, perhaps by bribery—at any rate, the long-cherished hope of his life had ended in smoke, and he had saddled himself with a black wife—all to no purpose.

He clenched his fist and went towards her.

“I’ll learn ye!” he muttered, his voice low and harsh with passion, his eyes gleaming red like those of an angry bull.

“No, Jamie, no,” and poor Nettie tried to run round to the other side of the table.

“Ah, ye would, would ye? Little black-faced nigger that ye are—I’ll learn ye——”

He caught her by the loose warm dressing gown that she was wearing and flung her violently on the floor. She struggled to her knees.

“Oh Jamie, for mercy’s sake don’t—spare the baby—my baby—Oh Jamie”—she tried to call out, but her voice choked as his raised fist descended on her upturned face. Fear, and a frantic desire to save the life of her unborn child, gave her a fictitious strength—she pulled herself up from the floor and stood at bay against the wall. With a snarl, like that of a wild animal, he threw himself upon her.

“D’ye think I care for ye—or yer brat? I’ll bash the life out of ye, yer ——” the vile words came pouring from his thickened lips in a stream of unpent passion.

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Terrified and stunned, Nettie stood against the wall, while his blows descended on her defenceless form. A sharp stinging pain in her shoulder drew a cry from her white lips and roused her flagging senses. She gave a quick dive under his arm, and ran towards the door. The fury of Mactarvish's passion was at its height—he sprang after her—picking up a chair on the way. The poor girl tried with her cramped numb hands to open the door, but terror and pain had deprived her fingers of the power of action, and realising that the worst had happened to her, she uttered shriek after shriek at the top of her voice. The sound maddened Mactarvish, with a yell he brought the chair crashing down on the head and shoulders of his wife, shouting as he did so.

“I’ll do fer ye this time, I’ll do fer ye—I’ll kill ye and yer brat—damnation blast ye both!”

Nettie fell senseless as the chair struck her and Mactarvish went on hitting at her prostrate form with unabated violence. Quick steps and voices sounded outside the door, and it was burst open by old Hoadley himself, who stood aghast for some seconds, staring at the bleeding senseless form of Nettie, stretched across the threshold at his feet.

As the horror of the scene burst on the old man, he threw himself upon Mactarvish, shouting:—

“Catch him, boys, don’t let him go; he’s killed his wife”.

The old man was hale and hearty and his sudden onslaught checked Mactarvish for the minute. Then, as he observed the room filling with people, and saw Mrs. Hoadley and Aggie kneeling beside Nettie on the floor, he realised with frightful vividness that he was in a very tight corner. Gathering all his strength for a final effort,

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he drove his fist into the old man's face and leaped towards the window. A quick blow, a swift jump, and he had cleared the sill, and bounded out into the night. Hoadley's sons raised a hue and cry, but Mactarvish had a good start and terror lent wings to his feet. He covered the ground rapidly, and was beyond the village before the chase had really started in earnest. In the darkness he got clear away, and after a while the few men who had tried to follow him, returned to the village, giving notice at the small police station as they passed.

None of the inmates of the Hoadley's house slept that night. Dr. Legate came as quickly as his best horse could bring him, but he saw from the beginning that one life had perished and perhaps two. He worked and watched with Mrs. Hoadley and the local midwife, as the poor girl struggled back into consciousness, only to sink again into the labour of child-birth. For six hours her life hung in the balance, but as the first streak of dawn threw a grey light across the black sky a tiny quiver parted her lips and she inquired for her baby. Aggie knelt weeping beside the bed.

"It's all right, Nettie dear, don't fret; it's all right."

They put a cold little form into her arms for a few minutes and she passed her fingers over the soft downy head; with a contented little sigh she sank back to sleep, never suspecting that the longed-for baby had been born dead. The long deep slumber saved her life; all that day she never moved, and when the evening came Dr. Legate told them that under God's mercy her life had been spared, and that with care and tenderness she would live. Poor Bulbul had been nearly frozen with terror, but when Aggie gave him the comforting tidings he threw himself into her arms like a frightened child and sobbed on her breast.

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She comforted and soothed him, bidding him "hearten up," and crooning over him like a mother over her first-born.

"If I had not left the house, this would never have happened," wailed Bulbul in an agony of self-reproach; "I was so selfish. I only feared for myself. And I was so happy with you and she was being nearly killed."

"Now don't you take on so, Tommy dear, how could you have stopped that beast in his drunken rage? My poor boy, it's little you could have helped Nettie, and he might have done for you, too—so don't take on, dearie, don't take on."

Mactarvish had fled away into the night without thought or heed whither his steps were leading him. He was a strong active man, and he had run a good five miles before he paused to look round and take his bearings. He found himself on the broad London Road, and making cautious inquiries at a wayside public-house he discovered that he was some miles away from East Grinstead. He took a drink and asked for a loaf of bread with it, feeling secure and easy in mind when he felt the loose silver and copper coins in his pocket, for he had plenty of money in his possession when he demanded the last £10 he had taken to London with him. He sat for a few minutes at the bar, leisurely drinking, and, cutting off a crust of bread with his clasp knife he munched at it slowly. He did not speak to any of the men in the tavern, keeping his eyes, as far as possible on the ground, and he was thinking as rapidly and coherently as his drink-muddled brains would allow. No feeling of remorse or even terror troubled him then, his whole mind was set on getting away, and London seemed to him the best place to strike for, once there he could make further plans.

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into his heart there entered the most ghastly of all human experiences—absolute despair.

The eldest of the Hoadley boys was present, and as his father had been one of the victims of Mactarvish's wrath, the young man felt himself entitled to hold forth at length on the occurrence.

"My poor old father" (the Sussex dialect is charming, but quite unwriteable) "a fine sight he be this day. A lump the size of a tater on his forehead, and his eye and nose all messed up. He's a hearty old fellow for his age, but he says it was like a mad bull at a gate when that darned Mactarvish drove his fist in his face. He went down like *that*"—a huge work-hardened fist descended with a bang on the deal table and made all the pewter mugs rattle and jump.

"Aye, aye," nodded old Norby, "and if your poor old father, who is, as you say, still a heartsome-like man, for all his fifty years, I say, if *he* fell like a stone, what of that poor slip of a girl he bashed about? We've all heard tell of husbands hitting their wives," and the old man winked at some of his cronies who tried not to look guilty, "but in all my life I never heard tell of a man hitting his wife the very day she was expecting a child—ugh!" his snort of indignation was echoed by every man and boy present. "It's hanging that he deserves," went on the old man, "and what's more it's hanging I hopes he gets."

"Hanging," said Green, his cheerful rubicund face set in a stern expression very rarely seen on it, "hanging! if he ever dares to show his face round here I'll learn him what an honest Englishman thinks of his doings. I'll take the law into my own hands, if I get a chance, and give him all he gave that poor girl."

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"And I'd help you."

"And so would I," fell from all the men present.

"It wouldn't be too much for his deserts if he was tore limb from limb—when I seed that poor little innercent a-lying there stiff an' cold, I felt as if I could ha' choked, and I ain't one of the crying sort—as you know, Mr. Norby—well, as I says, when I sees the poor little thing all black and blue, its little face all marks and bruises, I felt I couldn't stick it, I just had to go out—poor Mother's taking on dreadful."

Young Hoadley stopped to finish his beer.

"When's the funeral to be?" asked Norby.

"There ain't going to be no funeral—the poor little thing was killed before it was born and it was just put away quiet like this morning. Well, mates, I'd as lief be lying dead like that poor babe than be in the shoes of that murderer—Mactarvish. Murderer—that's what he is—a murderer—and he'll get his deserts, see if he don't."

Green had a powerful voice and it carried far.

The man crouching outside amid the shrubs heard most of the conversation with terrible distinctness, and in his distracted mind he was a double murderer, for he thought that Nettie was dead too.

His fingers stiffened on the window sill and he gave a convulsive gasp as Green's voice denouncing him as a murderer reached his ears.

"I'll swing for this, if they catch me," he muttered; "aye, but they *shan't* catch me."

Setting his face towards the south he rushed away from Dane Hill. "I'll head for the briny. I'll get away by sea from this cursed place."

Instead of following the road he trudged heavily along

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the side of the hedges, in as straight a line as he could for the south coast.

"They shan't catch me, if I can help it," he muttered, plodding on with dogged perseverance, in spite of hunger, thirst and weariness. Terror was greater than all these, and drove the wretched man to his doom. During the whole of that night he did not pause to rest, and when the light of the cold grey autumn morning broke through the clouds, it showed him that he was on one of the smooth undulations of the South Downs, wreaths of mist lying all round him and draping their gentle slopes. He drew a deep breath of relief, and, sitting down on the turf, he wiped his face and bared his head to the morning air. There was a small piece of the bread still in his pocket, he took it out and ate it with keen relish. He sat for nearly an hour lost in thought, he had no coherent ideas, but vague intangible projects formed and flitted through his brain. He was startled out of his reverie by loud cries and the barking of dogs. He sprang up, gazing wildly around him, and saw a burly farmer approaching, followed by two or three rough-looking rustics and some dogs. They waved their arms at him, shouted, and the dogs barked in chorus.

Mactarvish had but one interpretation to their actions. Starting up with a hoarse cry of terror, he fled blindly forward, leaping ditches and boulders in his flight, and never looking behind or pausing for breath. Ahead of him he saw what he took to be, a dense scrub of furze and brushwood, and at this minute the farmer behind him raised a shout of warning. Mactarvish redoubled his energy, and sprang well forward into what looked like the heart of the underwood—

Down, down, down, he fell into one of the narrowest

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yet deepest of the many chalk pits on the Downs. What they picked up later bore no resemblance to a human body. He was subsequently identified by his clothes, and buried with more decency than he deserved.

With old Hoadley's remarks the story of Mactarvish's life is ended.

"He was a right-down wrong 'un, he was ; a bad man, through and through, an' the very best thing he ever did in his whole life was when he jumped down that there chalk pit. There must ha' been a good bit of bad blood in him, perhaps he came o' vicious parents. I can't say I'm sorry he's dead, I'm not, and that's flat. The truth is that from his own relations to every man-jack in the village,—we're all darned well rid of him."

The musical dialect is absolutely impossible to reproduce.

CHAPTER XX.

IT was shortly after the death of Mactarvish that Sir Alec first told Lady Mary a revised version of the occurrences of the past few months. He wanted her help for both Nettie and Bulbul, and told her that, owing to an unfortunate mistake, and misguided by the evil influence of the dead man, these poor people had come all the way from India to claim the Farraday name and estate. Lady Mary was shocked at their stupidity, but her tender heart was touched by Nettie's sad story. From that day forward the Farraday carriage stopped regularly before the Hoadley's front door, and as soon as Nettie was strong enough, she, Bulbul and Aggie, were sent for long drives in the easily hung landau. Game, fruit and delicacies of all descriptions were continually sent to the invalid, whose one prayer and cry was to be taken back to India.

Sir Alec booked three passages, and Thomas Murray, his wife and Mrs. James Mactarvish sailed from London during the early part of October—they went out laden with good things, for nearly every one had given them wedding presents, and Lady Mary had generously provided Aggie with a very handsome trousseau.

Before he returned to London George noticed that Sir Alec was looking his cheery self again, and thought it a good opportunity to speak to him definitely.

"I shall be going back to London in a few days, and I

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have a favour to ask you, Sir Alec. I hope you will not think me importunate, but—will you give me your permission to ask your daughter to be my wife?"

Sir Alec gave a quiet smile.

"I don't think she will want much asking, George, she has already shown us, pretty distinctly, whom she means to marry—but I will not keep you waiting any longer, you may marry her whenever you like, my boy, and I will see she gets a little pocket money to dress on."

George tried to find words with which to express his thanks and joy, but Sir Alec cut him short by telling him to find Margery, and to go through the unnecessary formula of asking her to be his wife.

When she heard the news Lady Mary made only one stipulation—that George would wait until the year of mourning for Tots was over before he took Margery off to London.

Impatient as he was, George had to agree to this. In the spring of the next year a very pretty wedding took place at Farraday Hall in Sussex.

Quite distinguished people ran down from London to grace it with their presence. Among the host of magnificent presents Margery received was a diamond pendant, with these words scribbled on the back of a card:—

"Please accept this from me, although you have never seen me. God bless you! I know you will be happy, you have chosen a good man. STEPHANIE REUBENS."

Margery privately thought that she would never be *quite* worthy of George's love, and fully echoed the sentiment expressed by Mrs. Reubens. She wore the pendant on her wedding day, and looked lovely, as all brides do. There was feasting and revelling at Farraday Hall, and

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every one in the village turned out *en fête* to give their Miss Margery a right royal send off.

"So these were wed, and merrily rang the bells,
Merrily rang the bells and these were wed"—Tennyson.

This is an old-fashioned novel ending with wedding bells.

In the fairy tales of our childhood we read, "and so the brave prince married the beautiful princess and they all lived happily ever after," and we were never satisfied until this blissful consummation was reached.

There is a startling difference in our novels of the present day, the story usually begins with wedding bells and ends in the Divorce Court.

And who shall say that they are wrong?

With many, the true history of life begins with marriage, and thus the comedy and tragedy of modern existence is necessarily fixed within the period already mentioned.

But to those who still find pleasure in an old-fashioned tale, and who are interested in the fate of these out-of-date people, there are a few more details to add.

George and Margery were happy, as were also Bulbul and Aggie, each in a different degree; and the happiness of both couples overlasted the honeymoon, for there really are, and can be still, married lovers, in spite of all the new novels and the overwhelming evidence of the Divorce Court statistics.

Margery was contented with a small house and three servants for the first few years of her married life, in fact till after the birth of her third child, which took place in five years. About that period Dr. Richardson retired, and George took over his practice, rented a large house, with a fair strip of garden, and set up a carriage and pair

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for his wife. They had Farraday Hall and Dane Hill Lodge equally open to them, and the children were never kept in London during the summer.

Margery was pale and delicate after the birth of her third child, and Lady Mary carried her and the children down to Sussex, until she got back her health again.

Five years had passed since Margery had said good-bye to her childhood's home, and Lady Mary, seated in the garden, with all her family around her, felt herself a very proud and happy woman.

It was a glorious afternoon in July, and even Sir Alec had joined the noisy party round the tea-table, finding it too hot for riding or walking. He looked older, but fit and hearty still, and absolutely contented with life and what life had brought him. In his advancing years he felt he had come to safe anchorage, but he never forgot the stormy waters he had once passed through, and the remembrance of them, kept his heart humble and grateful. Dancing on the grass before him was a sunny-haired girl of four, little Mary, whose coming had taken a sting from her grandparents' heart, and filled the void in their arms. Every one adored the child, she seemed sent in place of their lost Tots, and was just such another naughty, loving, mischievous sprite. Nathaniel was the only one who made an exception in favour of his godson,—fat, good-tempered Georgie, whose pink legs could hardly carry his sturdy little body.

Cicely had grown a tall beautiful girl, more stately and dignified than Margery had ever been, and looking eminently suited to fill an exalted position, which was likely to be her fate, as a certain wealthy and distinguished young man was longing to lay himself and his title at her feet. Tom was away on tour in America, and wrote enthusiastic

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accounts of the beauty and vivacity of American girls, and of the great kindness shown him by Mr. and Mrs. Ezra Reubens.

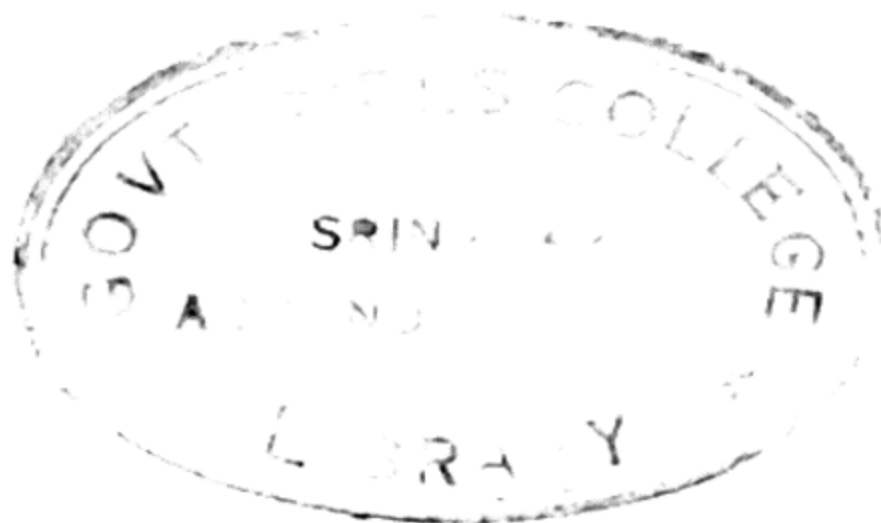
"I had a letter from Aggie Murray to-day," said Lady Mary, "shall I read you a part of it? She likes India and can talk the language, she says, and—er—here it is—'I am keeping cows, sheep, and goats, as well as the fowls and ducks I started with. They give me plenty to look after, and even then I don't feel I have enough to do. Fancy, my lady, I have servants to wait on me, hand and foot, and my husband's that kind to me, I can't tell you. Thank you, and dear Miss Margery, for all the lovely clothes you sent for baby, they do look fine on her, I wish you could see her. Perhaps, my lady, if Sir Alec wouldn't object, we might come home for one summer and bring the children, I should love to see dear old Aunt Packer again. Little Tommy's getting on finely now, thank you, my lady; he runs about everywhere, he is a big boy and such a chatterbox. My baby I've taken the liberty of calling Margery, and please ask Miss Margery's pardon for doing so. They are both fair children, and baby has my husband's black eyes, but I wouldn't have minded a bit if they'd been as dark as him. Nettie is so good, my lady, she dotes on the children and helps me at every turn, I don't know what I'd do without her'—well, the rest can keep. They seem happy enough, eh, Marnie? They have been married six months longer than you have, and she has two children and you have three!" there was intense satisfaction in Lady Mary's voice. Cicely and her young cavalier had withdrawn out of earshot, and were walking in the direction of the strawberry beds.

Margery glanced at the sleeping infant in her arms and smiled.

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“ I would not wish one of them away, and I hope I shall have another three ! Some of the people I meet in London are shocked—absolutely disgusted with me. They tell me I am hopelessly stupid to have more than one child and my husband only a poor doctor ! Very few of the women I know have any children at all and if they have, it's just the one, perhaps two by mistake. I am dreadfully old-fashioned and behind the times.”

“ It is just as well there are some few women left,” remarked Frizzie, blinking through her spectacles, “ who don't believe in race suicide.”



THE END

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